

BY "BUFFALO BILL,"--COL. W. F. CODY.

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TEXAS

JACK,

THE LASSO KING;

OR,

The Robber Rangers
of the Rio Grande.



TEXAS JACK IN THE LEAD, RIDING LIKE A VERITABLE CENTAUR--A COMMANDING AND NOBLE FIGURE.

Texas Jack, THE LASSO KING;

OR, THE

Archer Rangers of the Rio Grande.

A ROMANCE OF

MY PARD OF THE PLAINS.

BY BUFFALO BILL.

CHAPTER I.

THE LASSO-THROWER.

THERE seemed no help for it—the man must die.

He stood facing a cruel fiend in human form—one who had no regard for friend—who knew no mercy toward a foe.

It was in a small country town in Mexico, and a group of men were gathered upon a Plaza watching an exciting scene.

A man well dressed, in Mexican garb, had crossed the Plaza and was passing the group of men, when, suddenly, one called out in Spanish:

"Senors, behold!

"It is Don Miguel Sandos! Cover him with your weapons!"

In response to the command, half a dozen revolvers at once were leveled at the man.

If armed, no weapon was visible; if he meant to resist, no intention was yet shown.

Did he fear death, his face betrayed no sign of it, save that it became paler.

The one who had given the command to cover him now stepped forward a few paces, and, with his revolver leveled at him, said, sternly:

"I will now deal with you, Don Miguel Sandos, Captain of the Rio Grande Patrol."

"I am sorry to have to submit to one of your stripe; but I am no fool to throw my life away where the chances are one to ten against me, so must submit," was the cool rejoinder of the stranger.

"Of course you must, where I dictate; and more—you will have to die, unless you do as I demand."

"How much do you wish? for, of course, you mean to rob me."

"Of your gold, no. We are not the robbers you have posted us; but of your life, yes, unless you sign a paper recalling the one edict of outlawry against us."

"Ah, yes; you fret under the charge that you are a band of cut-throats and murderers."

"You have so posted the Rangers of the Rio Grande, because we serve under no commissioned officer of the Government, and take our own way of retaliating upon the cursed Americans," said the spokesman of the party of rather hard-looking men though their appearance was picturesque in their native dress, their dashing air, and armed to the teeth as they were.

"Your deeds of lawlessness have brought the remonstrance of the American Government, and our department commander was forced to take notice of your deeds, and ordered me to see if you were guilty as claimed by the Mexicans as well as by the Americans."

"My investigations proved that you were a lawless lot; hence, my order for you to disband, or be treated as men under sentence of death."

The Mexican officer spoke calmly, with his bright eyes looking fearlessly into the faces of the leader and his men, who stood half a dozen paces behind him.

He was a handsome man, above the usual height of his race his face was refined, fearless and resolute.

The costume he wore was that of a fatigue cavalry suit, and it bore the insignia of his rank, a major of Mexican lancers.

"Well, Don Miguel Sandos, major of lanceros, if you do not sign now a retraction of the edict against us, your moments of life are numbered."

"I issued it in full belief of your guilt, and I shall not, from fear of death, retract what I have done."

"Well, I have a paper here for you to

sign, for we were on the watch to catch you alone. It is for you to sign it or die."

"You would not dare kill me."

"Would we not?"

"No; for it would go to prove that I was right in my charge against you, and I do believe you would stop at no lawless act."

"Will you sign this paper?"

"No! I will not!"

"Remember, you die if you refuse."

"I refuse."

"Consider again!"

"I never consider where duty commands."

"Then I shall kill you."

"By a strange piece of negligence I am unarmed, or I would not die without resistance."

"Being weaponless, I can only say I refuse your demand, so do your worst," and the brave Mexican officer folded his arms upon his breast and looked his foe squarely in the face as he deliberately raised his weapon and took deliberate aim at his heart.

There was a moment of painful suspense.

Here and there around the Plaza were those who witnessed the scene, but the Rangers were too greatly feared by the people for them to dare offer resistance to their acts.

Just behind the group was a building with a balcony, half sheltered with vines, when, suddenly, just as the fearless young officer had given up all hope of life, with a whirring sound there shot forth in the air a coil; the noose descended about the neck of the leader of the lawless band, and he was dragged backward to the ground, with a force that seemed to tear the life from his body, for he lay there motionless, as though dead.

CHAPTER II.

TEXAS JACK.

THE one who had so suddenly thrown the lasso, from his unseen position on the balcony forty feet away, quietly threw himself lightly over the rail, hung by his hands an instant, then dropped to the ground without injury.

As his feet touched the soil it was seen that he held the end of the lariat in one hand, while in the other was a drawn revolver.

He scanned the group for an instant in silence, every eye being upon him; then he strode toward them with a quick, firm tread.

And those who gazed upon him beheld a man not of the race of Mexico.

He was about five-feet-ten, with full chest, broad shoulders, slender waist, and limbs that were perfect in athletic outline.

His hair was light-brown, wavy, and hung upon his shoulders, while a curling mustache shaded his mouth, which, as he spoke, revealed even rows of whitest teeth.

His face was handsome, with a *bonhomie* expression in which was mingled a love of fun and a spirit to do and dare.

Clear as crystal were his eyes, and they seemed to penetrate to the soul of the one he regarded.

An embroidered silk shirt, with a black silk scarf knotted under the broad collar, a pair of buckskin leggings stuck in handsome enameled top-boots, with small heels and spurs, a belt-of-arms, and a sombrero turned up upon one side, and pinned there with a star of rubies, and a handsome diamond pin in his scarf, made up a costume which was at once striking, serviceable and picturesque.

"When I call a man, senors, I stand ready to back up my play," said the stranger, in a quiet manner, as he stood before the Mexican officer and confronted the ruffians, and he spoke in very fair Spanish.

He stood with one hand grasping his lariat, the other end of which was around the neck of the still prostrate and motionless form of the man who had intended to mercilessly shoot down the Mexican officer.

The latter had been as much surprised at his escape and at the bold coming of his rescuer as the others, and stood regarding the handsome and nervy stranger as they did.

At the words they heard, the group of reckless-looking men gazed from one to the

other, and then at the stranger, but no one spoke.

"I know I do not chin your lingo to perfection, senors, but I have managed to make myself understood in it in making love to your pretty Mexican girls, and where it came to a *duello* with any of your kind who have crowded me; and I think you can understand me when I repeat that I am here to answer to the one who holds me responsible for yanking the life out of your leader, for, if I mistake not, his neck is broken."

"I understand you, senor for you speak excellent Spanish, and I waited for these men to reply before expressing my gratitude, for I owe you my life," and the Mexican officer stepped forward and held forth his hand.

But the stranger did not grasp it, and said:

"One moment, senor, for you are unarmed, and I dare not let these fellows get a drop on me."

"Come, men, see if your leader has not gone across the Dark River."

"You have killed him," said one, as he bent over him and found that his neck was really broken.

"I did not intend to do that; only to give him a fall; but his neck was not stout enough to stand the strain, it seems."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"String you up for it," was the angry response.

The stranger laughed, and he replied:

"Don't try it on, unless you have got more lives to spare than I see before me, for a call from me and you'll find the true Texas Rangers on your trail, even if you are on your own soil."

"You know the true Texans, eh?"

The group of men glanced uneasily about them and then at the house from which the stranger had come, and where his words led them to suppose there were more of his kind in hiding.

"Yes, we know the Texas Rangers, and they know us, too."

"As a lot of robbers and cut-throats, yes," was the cool reply.

Unheeding the stinging words, the one who had spoken continued:

"Yes, and we know you."

"Indeed?"

"Yes."

"Had I a glass of *aguardiente*, I'd drink to our better acquaintance."

"You will know us better yet, for Pedro Baez, our friend lying there, has got to be avenged, Texas Jack."

"Ah! you do know me, I see," smiled the stranger, and the others seemed excited as their comrade spoke a name well known along the Rio Grande, and feared as well.

"You do not deny that you are Texas Jack?"

"Oh no! I am glad to admit that I am that very individual!" was the reply.

CHAPTER III.

A TIMELY VISITOR.

"WHEN one has a trail of revenge to start on, the sooner he starts the quicker he is avenged," suggested Texas Jack, as he had admitted himself to be, speaking as though he expected a crisis and wished to bring it on at once.

His bold manner, and the hint that he had help at hand, caused the men he faced to dread an encounter.

They wished to avenge Pedro Baez and others who had fallen by the terrible Texan's hand; but they cared not to do so openly now, that was evident.

Their only plan seemed to them to be to strike in the dark, to stab in the back, and one of their number said:

"Well, we'll get our revenge when you are arrested for killing a Mexican citizen on his own soil."

"Indeed? Why do you not arrest me, then?"

"There will be no arrest, senor, for you killed that desperado to save my life. I am a major of lanceros in the army of Mexico; these men are but a band of proscribed men," said the officer.

"Thanks, senor, for your coming to my aid. I saw that you were in danger, so acted as I did. I know you well by name, though we have not met before."

"These men, I am sure, are members of the

band of Rio Grande Robbers; so if you wish to run them in, I guess we can do it."

At once it began to look as though there was to be trouble, for at the words of the daring Texan the Mexicans dropped their hands upon their revolvers.

They knew well if made prisoners, with the charge of Major Sandos against them, Mexican justice would deal quickly with them; so they were determined to bring the affair to a deadly encounter, in which some of them might fall, but Texas Jack would be sure to go under.

Major Sandos saw their determination in their vicious eyes, and, unarmed himself, he felt assured that the daring Texan would be the one to suffer, no matter what his pluck might be.

He therefore determined to prevent a combat at all hazards.

He opined, however, Texas Jack's seeming utter disregard of danger was due to the fact that he had help at hand, and this thought somewhat relieved the Mexican's anxiety.

But the Mexican ruffians had appeared to forget the reference the Texan had made of having help near, and their actions showed that they were determined to have the combat out then and there.

What the result would have been, no one could tell; but suddenly a horseman wheeled into the Plaza and came at a gallop to the scene.

He was apparently of the wealthy ranchero class, was elegantly attired, and his fine horse was richly caparisoned, with saddle, bridle and trappings worth a small fortune.

The horseman had the form of an Adonis, with a face almost womanly in its beauty, and as he drew rein he raised his sombrero with courtly grace as he saw Major Sandos and Texas Jack.*

Glancing at the dead body of Baez, then at the group of men, he said, sternly:

"What does this mean?"

"He killed our comrade, Pedro Baez, Senor Fuentes," said one.

"Who did?"

"That accursed Americano, senor."

"What motive had he?"

"He is Texas Jack, the Ranger Ranchero, senor, and he is a man-killer."

"Pardon me, senor, but are you Senor Marlo Fuentes, the Ranchero King?" asked Major Sandos.

"I am so called, sir."

"I am Don Miguel Sandos, major of lancers, and in the discharge of my duty on the border I ordered the surrender of a band known as the Robber Rangers of the Rio Grande, or that they should be regarded as outlaws."

"These men belong to that band, and their dead leader, there, sought to force me to write a retraction of my denunciation of outlawry or to die."

"I declined, so Baez prepared to kill me, for I am unarmed, when this brave Texan lassoed him from yonder balcony and came to my rescue. These men then sought to avenge their leader."

"Senor Don Sandos, I regret your unfortunate meeting with these men, for they are in my employ as cowboys, and that man there was their chief. They are a part of many whom I have on my ranches, and black sheep are to be found in every flock, you know, and these shall be dealt with, while I shall see to it that those who serve me, in the future, shall not masquerade as outlaws."

"To the ranch, all of you, and await my coming!"

"Take the body of that fool with you!"

The men cowered under the fiery glance of their employer, the Ranchero King, and taking up the body of their dead comrade, moved silently away.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RANCHERO KING.

MAJOR SANDOS gazed upon the ranchero with interest, for he had heard much of the man whose fame had spread far and wide.

*J. B. Omohundro, born in Virginia in 1842, went to sea as a boy, was wrecked on the Texas coast, became a cowboy, guide and scout, then a Ranger; served in the Confederate army as a scout, and afterward in Texas and Western Territories as guide, scout and Indian-fighter.—THE AUTHOR.

Texas Jack had also heard of him, and looked upon him with an expression of admiration and curiosity commingled in his face.

Rumor had it that the Ranchero King came of a good family, but one which had lived in obscurity for several generations, one of the members, having been a conspirator, being exiled to his mountain home.

There the family had grown rich, for they owned numberless acres of wild land, in which it was said they had found gold and silver mines, that were worked by peon slaves.

At last the time of exile had expired, and the sole descendant of the name of Fuentes came nearer to civilization, bought several ranches from impoverished old Mexican Dons, and had fitted up one residence like a palace, and which was, as well, rendered as strong as a fort.

He had entered the army at the age of twenty-one, and it was reported that he had been educated in the United States and Europe, going abroad at sixteen.

A man of wonderful physique, for he was really a giant in strength, though so graceful in form and slender, and with a face the perfection of manly beauty.

He possessed courteous manners; evidently had a fine education; had traveled extensively, and after his return home became known as a dead shot and wondrous swordsman.

Not strange, therefore, that Marlo Fuentes was not long in making his mark in the army and in society.

At a bull-fight one day, when an enraged bull had cowed the champion fighter, he sprung into the arena in full uniform and dispatched the fierce animal.

He had also tamed and ridden horses the best *vaqueros* dared not mount, and it was not long before he counted his love affairs by the score, while he hunted down his rivals with a feeling that seemed vindictive.

At last, after a dozen of the best young men in Mexico had fallen by his hand in fatal duels, an old soldier brought it to the notice of the authorities that each one of the slain had been descendants of the tribunal of officers who had sentenced his grandfather to exile, confiscated his estates and degraded his name.

Then the secret was out that Marlo Fuentes was visiting upon the children the sins of their parents—that he was seeking revenge and had marked his victims, and, through rivalry in love and other pretexts had brought them to the field, while he really had shown no desire to link his fate with any one of the numerous *senoritas* for whom he was supposed to have fought.

The result of this discovery was that Captain Marlo Fuentes had been asked to resign, and promptly his commission was tendered and accepted.

Then he returned to his castle-like hacienda and began to live the life of a recluse, with only his servants and cowboys about him.

Thus several years had passed, and in that time bands of raiders upon Texan soil had been rounded up on different occasions, each time to have it proven that they belonged to the estate of the Mexican Ranchero King.

He had disclaimed all knowledge of their acts, and told the officers of the law to do their duty, yet each man sentenced to imprisonment or death, had been rescued in some mysterious way before the day set for his punishment.

So, alone with his conscience, Marlo Fuentes lived his life of luxury, a mystery to all, hated by many for the death-trail he had left behind him, feared by many more, and adored as a hero by women who would have given their lives for him, but for whom he did not care, apparently, in the least degree.

Such was the strange man who had appeared upon the scene to the rescue of Texas Jack and Major Sandos, who had never before met the young Ranchero King.

With courtly grace he turned to the Texan and the officer when his men had disappeared, bearing the body of Pedro Baez, and said:

"Major Sandos, I regret deeply the indignity offered you to-day by my men, and their punishment you shall learn of soon, for I am master in my domain."

"I will also see to it that my ranch is weed-

those you just encountered, for my desire is to live at peace with my fellow men, if I can do so.

"You, senor," and he spoke English with only a slight accent as he turned to Texas Jack, "are well-known to me by name; but you risk your life in coming into Mexico where you have many foes."

"I ride toward the Rio Grande, and shall be glad to escort you on your way back, for should you meet enemies I can protect you from them."

And the Ranchero King smiled pleasantly, though the face of Texas Jack flushed with anger and a quick reply sprung to his lips.

CHAPTER V.

A WRONG AVENGED.

"PARDON me, senor, but, though I thank you for saving a row just now, I do not seek your protection in returning across the Rio Grande, for where I go I can defend myself," said Texas Jack, sharply.

The words of the Ranchero King he did not like, as he believed he detected in them a suspicion that he was in Mexico for no good purpose.

"I meant not to offend, senor, only to suggest that you might meet those who would be only too glad to seek trouble with the famous Americano, Texas Jack, whose coming to Mexico they would regard as being for no good purpose, and so seek to resent it."

"It is just as I supposed, senor—that you think I am here as a spy, or for some evil reason; but that is not true; I am not here for any but an honorable purpose."

"I have no such impression, senor, and I am sure that Major Sandos has not."

"No indeed! I never gave your coming other thought than to rejoice in your being here and so promptly serving me—a favor I shall ever remember; and if there is danger of your being attacked, Senor Texas Jack, upon your return over the Rio, I will escort you there with my lancers," said the major, warmly.

"I thank you, senor, but I prefer to return alone."

"This is not my first visit to Mexico, and to this little village; nor do I expect it to be my last."

"In that house, from which I came, dwells an old Mexican who served in the Confederate Army with me, for he then lived in Texas, and he once saved my life."

"He is very poor, and now and then I visit him to bring him a few pesos, and that is why I am now here."

"I overheard those men threaten to kill you, Major Sandos, and so I lassoed their leader as he was about to pull trigger on you."

"I did not intend to kill him, but then it so happened that I broke his neck and if I am to be tried for it, well and good."

"As far as I am concerned you shall never be tried, senor, and, as I said, I will escort you to the river."

"No, thank you, Senor Major! I will go alone, and as I am free, will start without delay."

"Then, as we go the same trail, Senor Texas Jack, we will ride together."

"No, senor, we go different trails, for I ride alone," decided Texas Jack.

Major Sandos was surprised at his seeming desire to avoid the Ranchero King, who appeared nettled, and replied:

"As you see fit, senor," and, with a courteous lifting of his gold-embroidered sombrero, the ranchero dashed away.

"Well, senor, you did not appear anxious to enjoy Senor Fuentes's company," the major observed, half inquiringly.

"We have met before, senor."

"You recognized him, then?"

"No, senor, I knew his voice, for his face I have never seen."

"I may be wrong, and if I am I beg his pardon; but if he was not the leader of a band who once captured me, and would have hanged me, but for the timely coming of my Cowboy Rangers, then I am no judge of voices, and he has a very remarkable one."

"Yes, full-toned and rich. But, why had he captured you?"

"They were raiding into Texas, sir, for booty. I rode upon them in ambush, but my men were following not far behind, so

saved me and ran them across the Rio Grande."

"The Ranchero King is a strange man, senior, and a very deadly foe; he leads a most mysterious life; but I never heard a word against his honor, though his men are constantly getting into trouble."

"But, come! Go with me to the hacienda where I have my quarters, just a league from here, and be my guest for the night at least."

Texas Jack was silent a moment, then said abruptly:

"I'll accept for supper with you, at least, Senior Major; but, I must recross the Rio Grande to-night."

With this the major remarked that he would go to the place where he had left his horse and return from there for him, in a short while, adding:

"An errand of mercy brought me to this village this afternoon, to see an old servant who is ill here. I came alone, a thing I shall be careful not to repeat in the future."

Texas Jack saw him walk away and mused to himself:

"There goes a man, a soldier and a gentleman. I like him; but, Senior Fuentes, handsome and courteous, impresses me as one who is not to be trusted."

"I may be wrong, but I'll stake big money that his honor is only skin-deep. He's a man to watch, fear, and be prepared for, as, like a serpent, you do not know when to look for him to strike."

With this, Texas Jack entered the humble home, which he had left by way of the balcony, and was met by a Mexican, whose hair was turning gray, and who said, eagerly:

"I saw and heard it all, Jack. Do you know you avenged me and my daughter? It was Pedro Baez whom I had vowed some day to kill, as he was the one who stole my child from me and caused her to take her own life, poor girl!"

"Yes, I am avenged by you, Jack."

"Thank God I killed him then!" was Texas Jack's almost savage response.

CHAPTER VI.

A RACE FOR LIFE.

SEVERAL months prior to the scene that introduces Texas Jack, the great Lone Star Scout, to the reader's notice, a party of half a dozen persons, well mounted; were flying along the American banks of the Rio Grande River, urging the animals they rode to their utmost speed.

In the lead was a man dressed in buckskin, and his looks indicated that he was a plainsman and the guide.

He rode like one picking the easiest and shortest trail for the others to follow.

Following him was a young girl, her face radiant with the rapid exercise, though her expression was one of deepest anxiety.

Her form was faultless clad in her dark-blue riding-habit ornamented with brass army buttons.

She wore a Mexican sombrero of red, richly embroidered in gold, and with a snow-white plume held in by an officer's hat-cord.

She sat her horse perfectly, and looked very beautiful as she sped on at full speed in the wake of the guide.

Behind her galloped an officer in fatigue uniform, but the straps on his shoulders bore the eagles denoting a colonel's rank.

His face was stern, cast in a noble mold, and his dark hair and mustache were silvered with gray.

In the rear rode a sergeant and four soldiers. They kept close up, for danger was hot upon their trail in the shape of nearly half a hundred Comanches, howling like demons, and urging their hardy ponies to their utmost to overtake victims they already deemed to be within their grasp, as they steadily gained in the pursuit, and were now not an eighth of a mile behind them.

"Ho, guide!" suddenly called out the colonel.

"Yes, sir."

"Find some place where we can halt and fight, for our horses are about used up, and the red devils are gaining rapidly."

"All right, colonel! We can take company along with us, if go on the long trail we must," answered the scout, and he added:

"There is a bunch of timber a quarter of a mile ahead, and in it a few rocks. We will fight it out there, sir, if you don't object."

"All right, guide," and the colonel urged his horse alongside the animal ridden by his daughter, and said in a low tone:

"Estelle, you have said that you would not fear to die, if it were in a good cause."

"And I repeat it, father."

"You are a soldier's daughter, my child."

"Yes, father."

"You have your revolver?"

"I have, sir."

"We shall stop in yonder timber and end it, fighting to the last."

"When I fall, and you know all hope is gone, send a bullet through your heart."

"I will, father!"

"There must be no mistake, no false aim, for you must die at once."

"I will, father; but is there no hope?"

"None, for they will overwhelm us, kill as many as we may in their mad rush upon us."

"Do not fear for me, father, for I will never be taken alive," was the reply of the plucky girl, and the expression on her beautiful face revealed that she was prepared for the worst.

Behind them came the yelling red-skins, now sure of their prey; before them was the little rise upon which stood a few dozen trees, growing amid a group of bowlders.

Had the little party been three or four times its numbers, and had time to prepare for defense, the chance would have been better for beating back their foes; but as it was, seven against half a hundred, and with the red-skins close upon their heels, there was nothing but death to look forward to, and the determination to die as brave men should.

The face of the colonel was set in its purpose to die defending his daughter to the last, and to bring as severe punishment upon the Indians as lay in his power.

The guide was cool and resigned, and muttered to himself:

"I always said some Injun would raise my hair, and they has pretty near got their fingers in it now."

There was no fear in the faces of the soldiers, for the sergeant and his men were ready to accept the alternative, and in fact their sorrow was more for the maiden than for themselves.

"Pardon me, sir, but you had better take her life with your own hand, when all hope is gone, than let her fall into the hands of the red devils, sir," said the sergeant, with a salute even at that awful moment.

"God bless you, sergeant! I did so decide, but she will take her own life when I am dead and hope is gone," assured the officer.

"A minute more and we will reach the timber."

"And three minutes more, sir, and the red-skins will be upon us—oh, see there, sir!"

The sergeant almost shrieked the words, as, suddenly, up out of a water-wash leading from the river, appeared a horse and rider, who dashed straight between them and their pursuers!

And behind him appeared other horsemen!

CHAPTER VII.

TO THE RESCUE OR DEATH.

ACROSS the Rio Grande, upon the Mexican shore, a party had halted for a noonday bivouac.

There was an officer wearing the uniform of the lancers, and holding the rank of a major.

A handsome, dark-faced, noble-looking man he was, under thirty years of age, and with the look of one willing to dare any danger in the discharge of duty.

His companions were soldiers of his regiment, and but six in number.

Their horses, splendid animals, were staked out in a little vale close by, and the major was enjoying his cold lunch as he indolently leaned against a tree near, his men being likewise pleasantly engaged.

Presently the eyes of the officer bright-

ened, as they fell upon some object far away across on the other shore.

He rose to his feet, sent a man to his saddle for a field-glass, and, as he turned it upon what had attracted his attention, called out quickly:

"Saddle up, men, for yonder is a race for life!"

"A small party of American cavalry are being hotly pursued by a large band of red-skins. We must help them if we can."

"We cannot cross the river here, sir," said one of the men.

"Why not?"

"There is no ford, Senior Major."

"The nearest ford is a league below?"

"Yes, senior."

"Too bad! It will be too late then," and the major again turned his glass upon the pursued and pursuers.

"There are fully fifty Indians, and they are gaining."

"There are one, two, three, yes, eight in the party, and it is a desperate chance for them—Ha! *Por Dios!* one of them is a woman!"

"Come, men! we must cross here."

"It will be a desperate swim, sir."

"Desperate circumstances demand desperate measures."

"Come! I will rescue that party, Americans though they be, or die with them, for duty, humanity, chivalry, demand it."

He threw himself into his saddle, shouting as he did so:

"Awake, Corsala, for a woman is in peril, and brave men, too!"

"Come, we are going to the rescue."

"I am not asleep, major, and I heard your heroic determination, but have no desire to place myself in danger to rescue Americans," and from beneath a *mesquite* tree, where he had been reclining upon his *serape*, an officer advanced, wearing the rank of a captain.

"Juan Corsala, do you hesitate when honor and duty demand your aid?" and the major wheeled his horse toward the one he addressed, just as his men rode up, inspired with their leader's spirit, and one of them leading the captain's horse.

"It is a desperate undertaking to swim the river at this point, and more so to face with half a dozen men half a hundred Indians, and to save the lives of half a dozen Americans," drawled the captain.

"And one a woman?"

"The more fool she for being caught in such a scrape."

"Very well, Captain Corsala; as you are afraid to go, I shall ask you to see that we do our duty, and if I fall, you step into my shoes, you know, as major," was the biting response of the senior officer.

"Ha! do you fling coward in my teeth?" cried the captain, irately.

"You heard my words, Corsala, and if I live I am responsible for them," shouted back the major as he dashed down toward the river, followed by his men.

They soon reached the water's edge, while Captain Corsala, with pale face, watched them and muttered:

"Yes, fool, you go to your certain death, and those with you; then I shall step into the rank you hold."

"I will watch your death-struggle with real interest."

He saw the daring major dash into the river, his men close behind him.

He saw the horses sink low, but with outstretched heads swim rapidly for the other shore.

It was a long, a desperate swim, and several times it seemed as though a horse would go under; but, struggling on, they all reached the other side, panting and tired.

A moment only for rest; then up the hill they clambered, the men afoot to rest their horses, and reaching the plateau where there was a water-wash, they mounted and rode on.

A ride of a quarter of a mile, and they heard the yelling red-skins close at hand; a moment after the gallant Mexican officer rode up upon the plain some distance ahead of his men, and dashed directly in between the pursued and the pursuers!

The Indians were wild with sudden alarm and frenzy of disappointment as they beheld man after man appear, following their dauntless leader, and open fire as they came; but, expecting a large force, they wheeled

in terror and rode back upon their trail, followed by a hot fire now, for the Americans had also turned about and joined their rescuers.

CHAPTER VIII.

UPON THEM!

"Your men are fatigued, senor, so send them to the timber to prepare for a fight, while I momentarily hold the red-skins at bay, though you see all the force I have with me to aid you."

So cried the Mexican major as Colonel Elwood rode up to him.

"I thank you, sir, and will do as you suggest; but, few as your men are, they are a host led by one who has risked what you do to aid us."

The Mexican courteously raised his sombrero, and the colonel gave the order to his men to go on and prepare to resist, while the Mexicans formed to momentarily check the Indians, and they also fell back on the timber.

"We are enough now, sir, to make a good fight, and your men I see are well armed as mine are; but, it is an imposition to draw you into a deadly combat for those not of your race," Colonel Elwood said.

"Humanity is as strong a bond, Senor Colonel, as is nationality. But the Indians have seen our force and are returning for the fight."

"Steady, men, and let them see that you are deadly marksmen at long range."

"Fire at will!"

The six Mexican soldiers fired almost together, and their aim was deadly, for the American soldiers now in the timber, gave them a cheer as they saw two braves topple from their saddles, and also three ponies go down.

"That will check them for awhile."

"Now we can retreat to the timber and hold them at bay. I will try a ruse of hoisting a signal as though for aid, near at hand, to come to us, and it may cause them to withdraw," said the Mexican major.

"Not until they have at least tried to break in upon us with a charge, major. They'll make that venture, at least."

"If we beat them off, your signal may then induce them to withdraw," answered the colonel, and he added:

"Permit me to introduce myself, sir, as Colonel Frank Elwood, commanding Fort Blanco, some dozen miles from here; and for my Government and myself I thank you for your most daring rescue, sir."

The colonel held out his hand, and taking it the other replied:

"I have heard of you, Colonel Elwood, and am glad to meet you, sir."

"My name is Miguel Sandos, major of lancers."

"Indeed? I have heard much of you, Major Sandos, and let me tell you how well you have served me, for there is another to thank you, my daughter who awaits us in the timber."

"But for you, senor, she would ere this have been dead, and by her own hand, for there was no hope for us."

"I was foolish to go so far from the fort, and with so small an escort, but the scouts had reported no Indians about, and I was anxious to make a scout about the country, for I have lately only been sent to this post."

"Yes, senor, we owe you our lives," and the colonel spoke warmly.

A moment after they rode into the timber, to find the American guide and the soldiers, with their horses, protected, Estelle Elwood in a secure place, and all ready to resist a charge.

A moment more and it came, the Mexicans having just time to get into position, side by side with their American friends.

Neither Colonel Elwood nor Major Sandos had a rifle, but they wore their revolvers in their sword-belts, and drew them, prepared for the fray.

As the half-hundred mounted savages came on at a rush, urging their ponies to their full speed, yelling like fiends, and firing a shower of arrows and a hail of bullets as they charged, to strike terror and death to their foes, it looked as though they surely must break in upon the little party of defenders in the timber, and thus soon end the combat.

"Throw no shots away, men," said Colonel

Elwood calmly. "Aim, each of you, at an individual Indian," and Major Sandos repeated the words in Spanish to his own men.

Just then Sandos raised his heavy revolver and at long range, took aim at the chief who rode defiantly in advance.

Crack—crack!

Up went the chief's arms and he fell backward from his horse, while his braves swept over him, though staggered by his loss.

"A splendid shot, sir," said a voice at the major's side, and turning he beheld Estelle Elwood standing within three feet of him, and by her father's side, the latter saying:

"My daughter, Major Sandos."

"She would not remain in hiding."

An introduction and at such a time!

The major raised his sombrero and responded:

"And I see that Senorita Elwood is prepared for battle," and he smiled as he saw that she held her revolver in her hand.

"I am prepared for the worst, senor," answered Estelle.

There was time for no more talk, then, for the soldiers, both Americans and Mexicans had opened fire hotly.

CHAPTER IX.

DOUBTFUL COURAGE.

THE Mexicans fired first, and their shots told well; then came the volley of the American sergeant and his men, and this, too, emptied saddles and brought down horses.

A lull followed, broken by the rattling shots of the guide's repeating-rifle, and a cheer went up as it was seen that he had not thrown away a bullet; every one had pierced a red breast, so steady had been the aim.

Then the revolvers of the colonel and Major Sandos spoke, while a couple of shots rung out from Estelle's weapon.

The Indians were staggered by this deliberate and death-dealing fire, and though almost upon their foes they wavered.

The Mexicans now ready fired again; the Americans poured in a volley instantly following, and the repeating-rifle of the guide, with the revolvers of the officers settled it as far as the charge was concerned, for, instantly, it became a stampede, though several warriors and ponies went down before they got to cover.

"We have brought down a score of them, at least!"

"Well done, men!" cried Colonel Elwood, and the major said:

"And dismounted as many more, sir."

Whatever the intention of the red-skins had been, about again charging the timber, they quickly changed it, as a loud shout was heard and out of the water-wash leading from the river, dashed an officer in Mexican uniform.

They supposed that the signal hoisted in a tree by Major Sandos, had been answered, as the officer halted and waved his sword, as though calling his men on, and, as with one accord, they started in flight, which soon became a mad race for safety.

"They will not halt if a pretended pursuit is made. Let my men go out, sir, for they will regard them as reinforcements," cried Major Sandos, and he called to his men to follow him.

"But that officer certainly has reinforcements, senor," exclaimed Estelle.

"No, senorita; he belongs to my regiment and is alone," was the answer, and the major and his men dashed away to show themselves upon the hill and keep the Indians going.

"You are surely not going to pursue, Major Sandos?" shouted Captain Corsala, as his superior dashed by, on the full run.

"Of course not; but a show of pursuit will keep them going."

"Will you command, Corsala, for I am wounded, I fear seriously."

"Wounded, major? Ah! that is bad—too bad! Return to the timber and I will command."

The major slowly turned his horse back toward the timber, reaching which, he said to the American sergeant.

"Help me from my saddle, my man, for I am wounded."

"I feared, sir, you were struck in that first volley they fired, but you made no sign of it," said Estelle.

"Father, Major Sandos is wounded," she called out.

At the call the colonel came forward and bent over the wounded officer, who said faintly:

"It is here in my side, sir."

"Guide, mount the major's horse, for he is comparatively fresh, and push hard for the fort."

"My compliments to Major Gorman, and ask him to send at once Surgeon Pelham and an ambulance, with an escort of a troop of cavalry."

"Say that we have a wounded officer and several men, with one dead soldier of my escort."

"Lose no time."

"You bet I won't, colonel, for that Mexican major will be saved if hard riding will do it," and the guide, Pioneer Pete, was off like a flash.

How seriously the Mexican major was wounded, there was no means of knowing, but both the colonel and Estelle feared that it was dangerous.

The major lay upon a *serape*, arranged for him by Estelle, and though his face was white, he made no sign to indicate that he suffered, while he asked now and then:

"Has Captain Corsala returned?"

Soon the captain and the men came back, bearing one of their number who had been wounded, as he had at first believed but slightly, but going with the others had soon shown that it was serious, for he fell from his horse and died in a few moments.

Two others of the Mexican soldiers had received slight hurts, so that the little party of defenders had met with a loss of two killed and four wounded.

As Captain Corsala approached the group, he said:

"The red-skins are in full retreat, Major Sandos, and I have to report the death of Pedro Sanchez."

"I am sorry. How are the two wounded men?"

"Their hurts are not serious."

"Colonel Elwood, this is Captain Juan Corsala, of my regiment."

The colonel shook hands with the captain, presented him to Estelle, and said:

"You came alone, senor, but your coming had effect, as the red-skins supposed you had a force behind you."

Corsala glanced at his wounded commander, as though to see what he had told regarding him, and replied:

"I came alone, sir, for I did not leave with Major Sandos, supposing he was going upon a foolhardy expedition; but when I discovered that aid was needed, I swam my horse over and did what I could."

"No excuse need be made, Corsala, for your coming," said the major, faintly.

Both Colonel Elwood and Estelle saw that there were strained relations between the two men, and, as the maiden walked apart to prepare lunch, which they had with them, one of the Mexican soldiers who spoke English approached her and said:

"It may appear wrong, senorita, for me to speak against my officer; but Captain Corsala refused to come over with us, and Major Sandos flatly called him a coward."

"The captain is next in rank to the major, so gets his place if he dies, and he crossed the river, to—if I wrong him the Holy Mother forgive me—see if we had not been wiped out by the Indians."

"When he saw them in retreat, then he showed himself."

"Please, senorita, watch by the major closely, for the captain would do him harm if he could, and you know his wound is a bad one."

Estelle listened with surprise and interest.

She saw that the major was the idol of his men, the captain not liked by them; so she asked a few questions that gave her a further in-sight into the situation.

Then she said:

"I thank you, my man, for telling me what you have. I certainly will see that the major is well cared for and a close watch kept upon him."

At the bivouac lunch the colonel, Captain Corsala and Estelle sat down, Major Sandos declining to eat anything, while the two bands of soldiers ate together, in a most comrade-like manner, getting along through

the Mexican who spoke English and the sergeant who spoke Spanish as interpreters.

Captain Corsala seemed charmed with Estelle, and proved to be a brilliant conversationalist, trying to make himself most agreeable.

Three hours after the guide left the timber for the fort the ambulance was seen approaching, the mules at a gallop, and escorted by a company of cavalry.

It was a welcome relief guard, indeed, for the major's condition was fast becoming critical.

He was soon made comfortable in the ambulance, and the entire party at once headed for the fort.

CHAPTER X.

A SUSPICIOUS ACCIDENT.

THE stay of Major Miguel Sandos at Fort Blanco extended to several weeks, for it was found that he was more seriously wounded than had at first been supposed.

He was an acknowledged hero there, among them all, and every one tried to prove their appreciation of his splendid services to their commander and his daughter.

The Mexican soldier who had been killed, was brought to the fort and buried side by side, with military honors, to the American trooper who had fallen.

Captain Corsala had insisted upon carrying the major to his own command, but Estelle had promptly protested that the ride would kill him over the rough trail to the fort, while it was easy traveling to the fort, and urged her father to insist upon his going with them in the ambulance.

When asked if he would prefer to go to his regiment the major had said:

"Surgeon Pelham, can I stand it?"

"My word is against it, sir," answered the surgeon.

"Then I will accept of the colonel's hospitality," but, in spite of this, Captain Corsala still urged, though in vain.

While at the fort, Major Sandos was the guest of Colonel Elmwood, and when at last he was able, after several weeks, to go back to his command, there were rumors that if he had not fallen in love with the beautiful Estelle, he surely had a heart of stone, and certainly a number of young officers were full of jealousy at the favor the major seemed to have met with in the eyes of the "Belle of Blanco," as the maiden was called by the officers.

Captain Corsala had twice come to the fort in an ambulance for his commander, each time to return without him, as the colonel refused to permit his departure, acting under the surgeon's instructions. The doctor had his cue from Estelle, for she had not forgotten what the Mexican soldier had told her, and wished Major Sandos to be fully able to take care of himself when left to the tender mercies of his secret foe.

But at last the major said himself that he must go, and the colonel had ordered an ambulance for his comfort, when it was reported that Captain Corsala had again arrived.

He had an ambulance with him, a driver and two soldiers as an escort, and declining the kindness of Colonel Elmwood's outfit, the major started off, with Juan Corsala riding in the ambulance on a mattress, as he was still weak and incapable of much exertion.

How far he was from the fort he did not know, when he was suddenly awakened from a sound sleep, into which the swaying motion of the vehicle had soothed him, by the crying out of the driver to his horses, and then seeing the driver leap from his seat to the ground, while the animals dashed madly on, now wholly without guidance or restraint.

One glance showed him that they were in a most dangerous part of the trail, and he knew that ahead they had to turn a mountain spur where, to go around faster than a walk, would be to dash to death over a precipice.

The major at once sought to rise, but could see that, in his weak state, he had no chance to spring for his life; so he gave up all hope, when, suddenly, a rifle-shot rung out; then another. The ambulance stopped suddenly, and swaying wildly, was overturned.

The major's fall stunned him, so he did not hear and see what followed, for there dashed forward a horseman who called out:

"Whoever was in this ambulance I fear is badly hurt.

"But, better that than to go to sure death over the precipice.

"Come, boys, let us help him. Yonder comes the driver afoot, and a horseman."

As the speaker looked up he beheld the driver coming along the trail and behind him rode Captain Corsala.

The latter now rode up and called out:

"Who checked this runaway?"

"I did, senor, though I had to kill the two horses. I met two of your men on ahead, and they told me an ambulance was coming along this trail.

"Why did you not take the lower one to the other ford?"

"I deemed this the best; but you need not have shot both my horses."

"Pardon me, but human life is more valuable than that of the brute, and I did what I deemed best and safest.

"If I were in your place, I would look to my friend, rather than the dead horses."

"Who are you?"

"A ranchero."

"Anything else?"

"A Texan."

"No name?"

"My pards call me Texas Jack."

"I have heard of you. Let your men lend a hand here to hitch my horse and this led animal to the ambulance."

"My men will lend a hand to succor that officer, but you and your driver can hitch up your own team," said Texas Jack, and he added:

"It seems to me that this runaway was unnecessary along this ridge. That driver should be looked to."

With this, Texas Jack and his four companions, cowboys from his ranch, carefully lifted the form of Major Sandos from the ambulance, and, placing the senseless officer on the ground, proceeded to right the vehicle.

Then they replaced him in it, and Texas Jack said:

"Fortunately, nothing is broken. That officer is stunned and needs attention, so push hard, is my advice, for your camp across the river. There are your two men coming back, so I will leave you. If another accident occurs, I will vouch for it that somebody wants to get rid of that officer. That is about the way things look to me now.

"Adios, senor!"

And the Texan and his cowboys, mounting, sped away—Texas Jack in the lead, as was his wont, riding like a veritable Centaur—a commanding and noble figure.

As they sped away the two Mexican soldiers, who had been riding some distance in advance, returned to the scene.

CHAPTER XI.

TEXAS JACK'S SUSPICIONS.

WHEN Texas Jack rode away from the little village with Major Miguel Sandos, after the affair which had so nearly resulted in a desperate encounter between him and the cowboys of the Ranchero King, the Mexican officer said to him:

"I heard much of you, Senor Texas Jack, and of your adventurous and romantic life, as I lay wounded at Fort Blanco, where Colonel Elmwood had me taken some four months ago."

"Yes, Senor Major, and I heard of your being there, and that you were wounded in your daring rescue of Colonel Elmwood and his daughter.

"I frequently do scouting work for the fort, though I am now settled on my little ranch, some thirty miles from Blanco; but I did not happen to go to the post while you were lying there wounded, so failed to meet you until the day you left."

"And did I meet you then, and am so remiss as to fail to recall you, for you have no ordinary face, senor, to forget, once seen?"

"You did not see me, Major Sandos, though we met. You lay stunned at the time, having had a runaway in your ambulance, and an upset that gave you a serious hurt, I believe."

"I am like a cat, senor, hard to kill; but now, I must ask—was it you who came to my aid on that occasion?"

"I did what I could, sir."

"Yes, you saw my horses running away

to certain death, and you shot them both, their falling upsetting the ambulance.

"My head struck the side of the ambulance and I was stunned, but it saved my life.

"I was told by Captain Corsala that an American cowboy had shot the horses, and I have sought hard to find out who he was.

"So it was you, my friend, who fired those shots?"

"It was, sir, and when I saw your two soldiers returning, I rode on with my men."

"Then it is a second favor that I owe you; twice my life has been your gift."

"Don't mention it, senor."

"But I must, and will prove my gratitude in some way, Senor Texas Jack."

"Without wishing to appear rude or inquisitive, senor, may I ask if the officer with you that day is a very warm friend of yours?"

"He is a captain in my command, and next in rank to me.

"Our two superior officers in the regiment are both off duty, one from a serious wound, and the other from illness of long standing, so I am in command and Corsala is the senior captain."

"And in case of your death takes your rank?"

"He does."

"Does he profess great friendship for you, senor?"

"Senor Texas Jack, Captain Corsala and I have never been really friends, and the day I was wounded we had a misunderstanding, which, however, was passed over, owing to his kindness to me afterward.

"Since my return to my command we have drifted wide apart, and, candidly, I fear some day trouble will come of his manner toward me."

"Pardon me again, sir; but I wish to say just this: it is my opinion that when your ambulance team ran off, it was an intentional thing, for the driver was not hurt, but leaped out before the horses began to run."

"Ha! do you know this, Senor Jack?"

"I rode over the trail and it showed me where he leaped out, and I read by the signs that the horses did not begin to run until some distance beyond that spot, while his tracks showed that he was running alongside of them, and Captain Corsala rode behind, leading your horse, which had been hitched behind the ambulance a few minutes before this, for what reason, you can guess. Officers do not lead horses, sir.

"I half hinted then, senor, that it looked bad; and more: I recognized that driver as a half-breed Mexican who came to Texas, and was run back across the border for his crimes—a fellow, sir, who could be hired to do any deed, even murder.

"I speak of this to put you on your guard, Senor Santos, for you know best whether there is reason to dread a secret foe in the captain.

"But more: the two soldiers were riding a full half-mile ahead, at the time of the accident, for I met them, and my shots at the horses called them back to the scene."

The major was silent a moment, and then said:

"Senor Texas Jack, I owe more to you than you can imagine, and I am going to ask you to do me still another favor."

"Name it, senor."

"If I will send that driver, Pablo, on a mission to Fort Blanco, will you capture him, and then get from him a confession of whether he was paid by Captain Corsala to send me to my death that day?"

"I will gladly do so, senor."

"Promise him, in my name, pardon for his act, and do not harm him."

"I understand, senor."

"Send me word when he is your prisoner, and I will come to you, for if Corsala is guilty I must know it."

"Now let us arrange on places as to when and where to capture him," and the two had arranged all when they rode up to the hacienda where Major Santos had his headquarters.

CHAPTER XII.

THE KIDNAPPERS.

It would seem that Colonel Elmwood had had such a sad experience in going away from the fort, attended only by a small escort, as to deter him from again doing

so; but, the colonel was a very energetic man, and much inclined to well and thoroughly understand the country about his command.

He had a record as a bold and successful Indian fighter, in the Northwest, and having to deal with a different class of red-skins in his new command, he wished to learn all he could about them and their country.

So it was that he often made dashes away from the fort with a small force only.

"He had two other elements, also, to deal with, the Mexican raiders who crossed the Rio Grande for booty or revenge, and the renegade Texans who robbed and killed and let the blame fall upon the Mexican outlaws.

There was then much lawlessness along the river border, and the few ranches had to be protected, as well as the settlements over which the fort was the sentinel.

Fort Blanco was a delightful post, with infantry, light artillery and cavalry, with a fair number of scouts, numbering, all told, some seven hundred souls, among them a fair contingent of officers' wives and children, which went far toward relieving the monotony of outpost life.

The colonel was a great hunter and fisherman, so it was not strange that his daughter had inherited his love of sport and often accompanied him on his expeditions after game and fish.

She rode a horse splendidly, as we already have noted; was a good shot with rifle and shot-gun and had killed big game, while she could land a fish most cleverly.

She prided herself upon being an all-round camp-fire cook, an accomplishment many regarded as valuable as the fact that she had graduated with the highest honors in art and music and at the head of her classes in a fashionable New York boarding-school.

As a young girl, when her mother was living and lived with her husband in a frontier post, Estelle had had considerable experience in wild life, and there gained a love for it that had caused her to long for the prairies and mountains once more.

The fight in the timber with the red-skins was by no means her first experience under fire, for she had been in a train that had been attacked on the trail, and also was in the fort when assailed by Indians on more than one occasion; so she had "smelled gunpowder" when bullets were sent to kill.

Having had no reports of trouble in the neighborhood of the fort of late, Colonel Elwood had started one morning to have a look at a bridge that was being built across a canyon on the southwest trail from the settlements to the fort.

It was a ride of twenty miles, but Estelle insisted upon accompanying him, and he yielded, taking along Pioneer Pete, the scout and guide who had accompanied him at the time of the race for life, and an escort of a sergeant and sixteen men.

In addition, a young lieutenant went along as his *aide* by the name of Richard Turpin.

The lieutenant was as wild a rider as the original "Dick Turpin" of romantic memory, and so had gained the *sobriquet* of Wild Dick from his comrades.

The canyon spanned by the bridge was reached by noon, and lunch was had there; but the engineer in charge reported that his scout had told him of Indian signs being discovered near, and the men were working under excitement, so he asked for a force from the fort to guard them.

"I will leave Lieutenant Turpin and my escort to-night, Brashier, and relieve them with a troop to-morrow," said the colonel, and he at once gave the order to his *aide*, who said:

"Certainly, colonel, but will you not take several of the men back as an escort with you?"

"No, indeed; for there is no danger between here and the fort, Turpin, and we will ride it rapidly, while we will have the guide."

"I was going to ask for him, sir, as he so thoroughly understands Indians and the country. I would rather you would take half the soldiers, sir."

"All right; we will need no escort."

"Pardon me, colonel, but I beg of you to at least take two soldiers with you."

"Very well, Lieutenant Turpin; detail the men you wish to return with me," answered the colonel; and, an hour after, he

started upon his return, Estelle by his side and the two cavalymen bringing up the rear.

They had gone but a short distance when they beheld two horsemen approaching rapidly upon their trail.

"Who are they, Murdock?"

"Texas Rangers, I think, sir, for I have seen them at the fort," responded the soldier.

The men soon overtook the colonel, and one of them said politely:

"We were told at the canyon by the engineer, sir, to guide you by a safe trail to the fort, for we reported to him that Indians were pushing through to ambush the one you are on."

"We are Rangers, sir, and were going to warn the fort."

"All right, my man; and thankful I am for the warning, though my scouts have reported no red-skins about."

"They are just moving, sir, and their advance is along on this trail; but we can take the river-trail and flank them."

"Very well; push ahead as rapidly as you please, for I wish to put my soldiers out to meet them."

The two Rangers rode to the front and led the way by a trail that soon brought them near the river.

As they passed through a canyon, heavily timbered, up before them, behind them and upon either side rose men with rifles leveled, and a stern voice cried:

"Hands up all, for we are man-hunters and woman-catchers from across the Rio Grande, and you are the game we want."

CHAPTER XIII.

A HORSEMAN APPEARS.

COLONEL ELWOOD'S face grew stern and pale as he heard the command of the leader of the road ruffians.

He glanced at the two rangers, and saw that they sat quietly upon their horses, with no apparent intention to resist.

His two soldiers, knowing what the threatening command meant, had quickly raised their hands above their heads.

A dozen rifles covered them, and resistance was not to be thought of.

Were Estelle not with him, and the two rangers proving true, Colonel Elwood would have attempted to break through the hostile line, but now, he must not think of it, so he asked with indignation in look and tone:

"What does this indignity mean, and who are you?"

"Don't get mad, colonel, for we have no desire to kill you, or harm your pretty daughter, if things go on as we wish them," the leader replied.

"What is your wish?"

"Gold, of course."

"Ransom, eh?"

"Yes, that is what we laid our trap to catch you for, and we got our Texas friends here to rope you in by telling you a little lie."

"Hal! you two men are traitors then?"

"We are Texans, but poor, and works for gold when we can get it, and this job pays us well."

"You belong to this band then?"

"For this little work, yes," was the unblushing response of the man who had told the story about the Indians.

"And this band is the one known as the Robber Rangers of the Rio Grande, I take it, for, save you two, they appear to be Mexicans, though their leader speaks English well."

"You've hit it, senor; we are the Robber Rangers, and knowing this you will understand that we are not to be trifled with," the leader said.

"Well, what is your demand?"

"You have shot half a dozen of our comrades, and each life is worth a thousand pesos to us."

"Then your own life is worth five times that sum, and we'll place your daughter at the same figure, which means sixteen thousand pesos for your release, and if you refuse we will kill you and still hold your daughter for ransom, and you bet we will treble our price, if you force us to it."

"You are a lot of cowardly cut-throats and robbers, and I shall refuse your demand, for you will not dare carry out your threat."

"Ah! that is your game, is it?"

"Well, colonel, we must strike you deeper than through yourself."

"How do you mean?"

"Through your daughter."

"By Heaven! do you but dare—"

"Hold, Senor Colonel, and hear me, for I vow to you that you shall go to our stronghold one way, and your daughter by another trail; while to prove that we mean just what we say—that we are in deadly earnest—we will now at once get rid of your two soldiers—see!"

With his words the leader turned to his men, gave them a signal, and before the colonel, Estelle or the two victims of their cruelty had a thought of what the ruffians would do, half a dozen revolvers cracked and the unfortunate soldiers dropped from their saddles, dead.

"My God!" cried the colonel, and he whipped out his sword as though to ride upon the leader and cut him down.

But Estelle grasped his bridle-rein and checked him, while she cried:

"Hold, father! Do you not see that they show no mercy?"

Then, turning upon the leader, she continued in ringing tones:

"You well deserve the name you have won as cowardly desperadoes, for your act in killing those brave fellows proves that you strike like the snakes that you are!"

"Sh, my child! for, as you said, they show no mercy. I must pay this ransom demanded. Ah! there comes a horseman, but, alas! he is also a Mexican."

The Robber Rangers started at the words of the colonel, and all eyes turned upon the approaching horseman.

Who he was the words from half a dozen of the Rangers made known, for, recognizing him, the captors of the American colonel and his daughter cried:

"The Ranchero King!"

A glance showed that the Robber Rangers were uneasy at the coming of the ranchero magnate.

They made no effort to resist him, no attempt to make him a prisoner, but glanced at each other anxiously, several speaking in low tones.

"Who did you say he was?" asked the colonel.

"The Ranchero King."

"I have heard much of him."

"Yes, father, he is known as the Ranchero King, but his name is Don Mario Fuentes. Very strange stories are told about him, as you have heard," Estelle said.

A moment after the Ranchero King drew rein before the colonel and Estelle, to whom he courteously raised his sombrero.

It was the day after his meeting with Texas Jack and Major Sandos in the Plaza of the little village, and his splendid horse looked as though he had been hard ridden, for some reason.

Both Colonel Elwood and his daughter gazed upon the remarkable man with looks of undisguised admiration and amazement, and returned his salutation. Then he spoke in perfect English:

"Pardon, senor, but may I ask why a colonel of the United States Army, and a lady are halted by my men, while two of your soldiers lie dead in the trail?"

"Ah, senor, I regret to hear you say that men who call themselves Robber Rangers are under your control, for I did not believe the Ranchero King, as they spoke of you upon your approach, commanded a band of cut-throats and assassins."

"Nor do I, senor, when I know it. I have many men under my orders, attached to my different ranches, and only lately am I discovering that they, at times—a few of them at least—herd themselves as robbers and murderers."

"These men, senor, I shall deal with when I have heard your story," and the Ranchero King smiled pleasantly, and again raised his sombrero.

CHAPTER XIV.

DEADLY RETRIBUTION.

BOTH Colonel Elwood and Estelle were deeply impressed with the picturesque bearing of the Mexican ranchero, his splendid appearance, remarkably handsome face and the melody in each tone of his voice.

He had boldly admitted that the men calling themselves Robber Rangers were in his employ, and yet had given a very plausible reason for not knowing them as desperadoes.

"I wish to hear your whole story, Senor Colonel, and just what happened; also how these two men were killed," said the Ranchero King.

The men moved more and more uneasily. The coming of their chief seemed to have completely cowed them, though he was but one man and they a dozen caught in their lawless and murderous acts.

"You shall hear the whole truth, senor, of this outrage upon us," replied the colonel, and he proceeded to tell of his ride to the canyon bridge, the rumor of Indians being about, and how he had left his escort, save the two unfortunate soldiers!

Then he spoke of the coming of the two Texans who claimed to be Rangers, going to warn the fort of danger, and whom Engineer Brashier had sent to guide him by a safe trail back to the fort.

Then he told of their leading them into an ambush and proving to be two of the robber band.

The colonel's mien and tone showed how deeply angered he was at the unparalleled outrage.

The Ranchero King listened with a strange smile curling his handsome lip, and when he had heard all, he said, in his gentle way:

"You have been treated shamefully, Senor Colonel, and I regret it most deeply, especially as the lady, your daughter, was forced to witness the murder of your two soldiers.

"The old Biblical law, 'a life for a life,' is just, sir, and that is the retribution I shall mete out in this case, if the senorita will pardon a second scene of death," and before the colonel or Estelle could understand what his gently-spoken words meant, he quickly drew his revolver; once, twice it cracked, and out of their saddles fell the two pretended Rangers who had led them into the trap.

Not a cry came from their lips, for the bullets had pierced their brain ere they even suspected what was to be their doom.

"Now, Jacinto, get to my hacienda with all speed, with your band. I will deal with you later!"

The ruffians, picking up their two dead comrades, started off at once for the hacienda, evidently anxious to get out of the king's sight and presence.

"Hold! two of you remain here to guard the bodies of these dead soldiers, until this gentleman sends after them from the fort," the ranchero ordered, as the gang were hurrying away.

"Now, Senor Colonel, permit me to act as your guide until you are on the right trail to the fort, for in coming toward this ford you were led wholly out of your true course."

"I thank you, senor, but there comes one whom I recognize and who will serve as our guide," and the colonel pointed to a horseman advancing along the river-trail at a gallop.

"It is Texas Jack, the Ranger Scout," cried Estelle, who was just recovering from the Ranchero King's quick retributive justice for the murder of the soldiers, for, with her father she had been inexpressibly startled and pained by his terrible act.

"Yes, it is Texas Jack—a gentleman whose acquaintance I had the pleasure of making in Mexico, yesterday, and who, to save the life of Major Sandos, very properly killed another of my lawless men," said the Ranchero King quietly.

Before the colonel or Estelle could speak more the Texan drew rein in their midst.

If he was surprised at seeing the two dead soldiers lying there and the Ranchero King with Colonel Elwood and Estelle he did not show it in his face.

He had not come by the trail on which the Robber Rangers had disappeared in going to the ranch, so had not met them bearing their dead companions.

Texas Jack saluted the colonel as a soldier would, raised his sombrero to Estelle and bowed somewhat coldly to the Ranchero King, awaiting for the officer to speak.

"Well, Texas Jack, I am glad you have come, for we have had a scene here I do not care again to pass through," the colonel explained.

"Surely, sir, the Ranchero King could not have been guilty of—"

"Hold on, Senor Texas Jack! Do not accuse me and thus make us bad friends, though I feel that for some reason you do not regard me kindly," and the Ranchero King's eyes scintillated in a way that was ominous of trouble.

"No, no, Omohundro, the Ranchero King—or rather, Don Mario Fuentes as I should more properly call him—came to our rescue, and at a time when we sadly needed his aid, for my two men there had been shot down mercilessly, and we were in a position of great peril.

"We owe much to Don Fuentes," the colonel hastened to add.

Texas Jack rejoined, speaking quietly:

"I beg your pardon, Don Fuentes; but, seeing the dead soldiers, I could but suspect that it was your deadly duelist work."

"I hardly understand how you reason that out, senor, as I do not go around taking human life, though cruel circumstances beyond my control have made me an avenger," and a look of intense sadness swept over the face of the Don which all three noticed—a look that changed his expression to one of womanly softness, as though sorrowful memories had been called up by his brief explanation of why he had been a deadly duelist.

"Yes, we owe much to Don Fuentes, and his two men that are to remain here on watch until I send after the bodies of these poor soldiers, while I shall ask you, Omohundro, to guide us to Fort Blanco."

"With pleasure, Colonel Elwood, for I was on my way to Fort Blanco, sir," answered the Texan, and Don Fuentes responded:

"Then, Senor Colonel, my services are not necessary, so I will bid you *adios*, while I pledge you that justice shall be meted out toward those who cast this indignity upon you and the senorita."

The Don raised his sombrero, but the colonel urged his horse forward, and, extending his hand, again thanked him for his rescue, while Estelle did the same, also offering her hand, which the Mexican bent low over, with uncovered head.

With a wave of the hand to Texas Jack he rode away, halting to give his two men a command, while the colonel and the others moved on their way to the fort.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TEXAN GUIDE.

Texas Jack took his position ahead of the colonel, by whose side rode Estelle, and at once began to go by the most direct trail back to the broad one from which the Robber Rangers had led them.

When they came into the main trail, the colonel called out:

"Drop back alongside, Omohundro, for I wish to speak to you."

Texas Jack obeyed, and the colonel continued:

"I wish to tell you of the affair with those scoundrels, and of our rescue by that very mysterious person known as the Ranchero King."

"Yes, sir."

The colonel told his story, and when Texas Jack heard of the quick retribution visited upon the two robbers by the Ranchero King, his face revealed his surprise.

"They shot the soldiers down at the order of their leader, sir?"

"Yes, as a proof that they would not trifle with me."

"And the Ranchero King killed the two men who had led you into the trap?"

"Just as coolly as though he had been simply emptying his revolver."

"He fired quickly, but each man was shot between the eyes, as a proof of his deadly aim."

"They were Mexicans, and under his employ, so of course I can make no report officially of the affair, other than to state the circumstances."

"These rich rancheros in Mexico, Colonel Elwood, hold life cheap among their people, and the Don is noted as a man-killer."

"He was determined to show you that he would take life for life and visit quick and deadly punishment upon those who had wronged you."

"So he said; and he certainly very quickly

materialized into judge, jury and executioner."

"And the leader of the band, sir?"

"He appeared to be in great awe of his chief, and yet, with perhaps a like fate staring him in the face, the Ranchero King ordered him to go to his hacienda with his men and await his coming."

"And the Ranchero King seemed to feel no fear of his not going, Mr. Omohundro," Estelle remarked.

"It seems strange that he was not punished as the other two, and I have a curiosity to know what his fate will be," Texas Jack said.

"Did you learn his name, sir?"

"The men called him Antonio, the Ranchero spoke to him once as Antonio Vasquez," said Estelle.

Texas Jack took a note-book and pencil from his pocket and wrote down the name of the Mexican.

Then he asked about the rumor of redskins near the bridge Engineer Brashier was building, and said:

"They are but a prowling band, sir, for they are not in force, rest assured."

"Now Omohundro, what have you against the Ranchero King, for I saw that something was wrong between you?"

"It may be prejudice on my part, sir, but I do not like the man."

"I heard a voice once that was either his, or its counterpart, and under circumstances when I could not see the face of the speaker."

"If he was not the one I heard speak that night, then his voice is the same."

"Yesterday I saw him over in Mexico, and he came to my rescue at a time when I was in sore need of aid, for I had gotten into trouble in defending Major Sandos."

"Yes, he spoke of meeting you and Major Sandos, yet did not refer to his having played a conspicuous part in the meeting."

"The man seems strangely modest, is as gentle as a woman in his ways, and I rather like him, though beneath his velvet exterior he showed the claw when he killed those two men, surely."

"Yes, there is something fascinating about him, though I do not think I could regard him with real friendship," remarked Estelle.

"Yes, miss, and soft mannered and woman-faced as he is, the Ranchero King is a perfect devil in battle, as he has shown, and in duels he has shown himself merciless and a most deadly foe, for he has killed more than a dozen men, but always in the fairest manner I have heard, and he gives every advantage to a foe in a *duello*.

"He is a strange, a very strange man, and his cowboys idolize him, even though they stand in terror of him."

"Well, he certainly served us well, and soon I will prove my appreciation by calling at his hacienda to thank him as he deserves," said the colonel.

Just then they came in sight of the fort and rode forward more briskly, Texas Jack again taking the lead as guide.

CHAPTER XVI.

AT FORT BLANCO.

Texas Jack's mission to Fort Blanco was to make known to Colonel Elwood that he believed that a band of Mexican raiders were preparing for a dash across the river.

He had heard as much from his old Confederate comrade in Mexico, who acted as his spy across the Rio Grande.

This he confided to the colonel when he saw him in his quarters after their arrival at the fort; and he also stated that he would, with his cowboys, be on the alert to watch their coming and send a courier at once to Fort Blanco with information of their coming, their force and the direction they would take, so that troopers could be sent to the different fords to head them off upon their retreat.

The return of Colonel Elwood and Estelle with Texas Jack, and without their escort, caused considerable suspicion at the fort, and when the truth became known there was great excitement felt by one and all.

A party was at once dispatched to the scene of the tragic occurrence, to return with the bodies of the soldiers, and a courier was sent to the canyon to order Lieutenant Dick

Turpin and his men back to the fort, as the colonel now felt there was no need of their remaining there, and Texas Jack said that he would scout around that part of the country on his way to his ranch, and report the result.

Estelle had become a still greater heroine, through this second thrilling adventure she had met with, and ladies and gentlemen admirers all pressed around her that night with their congratulations.

There were several of the officers at the fort, and one of the ladies, the wife of Captain Burton Bemis, who had met the Rancho King, and they all spoke of him as a most remarkable person, handsome, elegant in manners, and said to be a man of very great wealth, though his life had a cloud upon it and he was dangerous as a foe.

That he lived the life of a recluse all had heard, and one of the young girls at the fort, Estelle's dearest chum, said playfully:

"I think with your two Mexicans, Estelle, you might give one to me."

"I will not be particular, though I like Major Santos immensely, but will take the Rancho King."

"Yes, I'll take the Don and tame him, draw him out of his hermit-like life and see if he will not give us all a grand ball in that elegant hacienda I learn he possesses."

"I wish that you would Delle, for I, too, have a curiosity to see his palatial home, but I'll not give him to you until I am sure that I will not fall in love with him myself," answered Estelle.

Whereat Major Gayle Gorman, the next officer in rank to the colonel and a gallant bachelor remarked:

"I think there should be a law passed against our army girls falling in line outside of our own regiments, for here, it seems, we are likely to lose Miss Elwood and Miss De Silva, though it appears to be undecided as yet which one will get that dashing, splendid major, Santos, or the mysterious and handsome Rancho King."

"Gentlemen all, we must not allow Mexicans to rob us of our brightest treasures."

An applause followed the words of the major, while Delle De Silva burst out into a merry peal of laughter, and said:

"What brave gallants are here, to become alarmed before the enemy even make their attack!"

"But, candidly, I shall ask Major Santos to have this mysterious Rancho King accompany him when next he visits the post to see—the colonel," and Delle De Silva cast a shy glance at Estelle, who, however, looked wholly unconscious that all eyes turned upon her.

Just after breakfast, the next morning, Texas Jack rode away from the fort on the trail to his ranch.

Soon thereafter, in the distance, two parties were seen approaching Blanco, one being Lieutenant Turpin and his men returning, and the other the squad sent out after the bodies of the two murdered soldiers, in whose honor the flags were at once lowered to half-mast.

CHAPTER XVII.

HELD UP ON THE TRAIL.

UNTIL he was out of sight of the sentinel on the lookout at the fort, Texas Jack held along the trail he had started on, and which would lead him to his own ranch.

But, dropping the flag from view, he branched off from the trail, going to the right and toward the Rio Grande River.

After a ride of a couple of miles he came to a spot that overhung the river, and by which a narrow trail led down to the ford.

He halted, staked his horse out, and then from a point of observation where he could see yet not be seen, he took his field-glass and began to search the shore beyond, a view of which he could obtain for a number of miles.

"He is coming, yet miles away. I have plenty of time," he said, and began to look about him.

Taking his lariat from his saddle-horn, he walked over to where there was a bank overhanging the trail.

Here he found a spot that was free from brush, and where he had room to swing his lasso.

The lariat was then tied by one end to a sapling near, and the other end was carefully coiled and laid upon the ground.

Then the Texan sat down to watch the one he had seen coming.

The man was now not far from the river and coming along at a slow lope.

Reaching the river, he rode in and slowly began to pick his way across.

He was dark-faced, and his hair was evidently worn long, though he had it coiled and fastened up under his sombrero.

He was dressed in a woolen shirt, buckskin leggings and top-boots, and wore a belt of arms about his waist, while a rifle hung at his saddle-horn, the saddle being completely concealed by a *serape*.

Reaching the American shore, the man dismounted, unfastened a roll from his saddle and drew forth the uniform of a Mexican lancer, hat and all.

He also took from it a military bridle, and removing the *serape*, the latter was also seen to be of the Mexican army pattern.

In this uniform the man rigged himself, putting his sombrero and clothes in the roll, and strapping it to his saddle.

Then he mounted, having been changed, both horse and rider into a lancero and his steed.

Up the narrow trail he went, and when near the top, he suddenly found himself encircled in the coils of a lariat, and heard the stern command:

"Keep cool, pard, or a bullet will quiet you."

The man's face had turned to ashen hue, and his eyes quivered in their sockets as he saw Texas Jack suddenly appear before him, his repeating rifle covering him.

"Who are you, senor, that holds up a Mexican soldier bearing dispatches to the American fort?" he asked in Spanish.

"Bah! Pablo the peon! Speak English, Pablo, for you can do so, as I know."

"You are mistaken, senor, I do not speak English."

Texas Jack laughed, and replied:

"Then how did you know what I just said to you, Pablo? Caught again in your own net!"

"My name is not Pablo the peon, senor," and the man still spoke Spanish.

"No, you are now in the disguise of a Mexican lancero, but I knew you when you were a half-breed Mexican desperado, Pablo."

"Come, no monkey business with me, for I am in deadly earnest. I saw you change your rig to that uniform, and am aware that you have a letter from Major Santos of Mexico, to Colonel Elwood of Fort Blanco."

"*Madre de Dios!*" gasped the fellow, crossing himself in terror, and then he muttered:

"You are a *diablo*, Texas Jack."

"Ah! I see that you do know me, Pablo, though you pretended not to do so."

"I recognized that ugly mug of yours when I saw it some time ago on the ridge trail when you were driving an ambulance, and I am anxious to have a talk with you."

"Another time, senor, I will meet you where you wish, but now I am bearing an important dispatch from Major Santos to Colonel Elwood."

"Oh, no, I would never see you again, unless I laid for you and roped you in as I did just now."

"I wish to ask you, Pablo, when you joined the Mexican Army?"

"Some time ago, senor."

"That is indefinite, and some time may mean minutes, hours, days or months."

"You were driving an ambulance not long ago, then you were in Texas rig, and now you are in uniform; but, dress as you may I have something to say to you."

"Be quick then, senor."

"No, I shall take my own time. But now, Pablo, dismount and I'll take your weapons as they are dangerous playthings in your hands."

Resistance was in vain, Pablo was disarmed, forced to dismount, and led to a spot on the bank above, where the Texan coolly bound him to a tree.

"Now, Pablo, I wish to know who it is you are serving—Captain Juan Corsala, or Major Miguel Santos. Upon your answer depends your life and your fortune in the future; let me inform you, in all earnestness, to tell me no lies, for, mind you, I know the truth when I hear it."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CONFESSION AND A REWARD.

THE Mexican peon was evidently greatly alarmed.

He knew Texas Jack well, and the influence he held in the Lone Star State and with army officers.

He felt that he had been held up for some deep purpose, and his face was pallid as he dreaded the death he had never hesitated to visit upon any one who stood in his way.

He was a villain and a coward at heart, and the words of the Texan, that his future fortune depended upon what he said, caused him to feel that he had one chance of escape.

"Now, Pablo, I wish to say that you drove an ambulance for Captain Corsala, to carry Major Santos from Fort Blanco back to his quarters in Mexico."

"You are not in the service, and you were engaged for that drive, and it paid you well."

"Since then you have hung around the lancers' camps, awaiting further orders to be useful to your master, and for which you expect good pay."

"Now I find you going as a courier for Major Santos to Fort Blanco, and fearing that you might be recognized in Texas and hanged, you changed your clothes for a uniform."

"Now, Pablo, how much were you paid by Captain Corsala for leaping out of the ambulance, the day you were driving Major Santos, setting the horses on a run and plotting thus to destroy his life?"

"Ah, senor, who has told you?" cried the peon, speaking for the first time in English.

Texas Jack laughed in his light way and said:

"What was your price, Pablo?"

"One thousand pesos, senor."

"Did you get it?"

"I got five hundred, senor, and—"

"And what?"

"A promise of the balance."

"A written promise?"

"Yes, senor."

"Where is it?"

"At my camp."

"You lie! You have it with you."

"If you take that from me I will have no claim upon the captain for it," urged the peon.

"Which pocket is it in, sir? Quick, for I will stand no nonsense."

The peon told the Texan where to find it, and the paper was quickly extracted, unfolded and read.

It was as follows, and in Spanish:

"Due Pablo, the peon, the sum of five hundred pesos, when he has completed certain work he has guaranteed to do for me."

"JUAN CORSALA,

"Captain, etc."

So read Texas Jack aloud, and folding the paper he put it in his own pocket, with the remark:

"The date on this is the day before the runaway on the ford trail."

"Now, Pablo, you did your share to carry out your bargain, but luck was against you, and in favor of the major."

"Why did not Captain Corsala pay you the balance?"

"He said that I had not carried out my bargain in full, and kept me in his pay until another chance came for me to finish the work."

"When he would pay you more?"

"Yes, senor."

"How much?"

"He would pay me all the money due, and five hundred pesos more."

"Well, Pablo, I wish you to sign your confession, when I write it down, and—"

"You will give me a reward, senor?"

"Yes, you shall have your reward when you have signed it."

The man's eyes glittered with avariciousness, and he said eagerly:

"I will sign it, senor, for I do not care who pays so I get the benefit, but it must be more than the other, or I lose."

"It will be more, Pablo."

"Now to your confession."

And Texas Jack wrote down with a pencil in his note-book a confession that the Mexican peon had entered the service of Captain Juan Corsala for the purpose of getting rid

of Major Miguel Sandos, by putting an end to his life in a way that would appear as an accidental death.

"There, Pablo; sign this, for I happen to know that you both read and write well."

The man took the pencil, looked over that which Texas Jack had written, and then wrote his signature to it in a bold hand, signing it:

"Pablo, the Peon."

As he wrote his name he said, eagerly:

"There it is, senor; so now pay me my reward, and let me go on my way, for I am to get a golden eagle for carrying the letter."

"Here is the golden eagle, Pablo, so that squares that debt. I will take the letter myself."

Texas Jack handed over the gold-piece, and took the official envelope addressed to Colonel Elwood. It was simply a blind, for there was nothing inclosed in it.

"Now the reward, senor."

"It is your life, Pablo."

"My life?"

"Yes; I shall set you free instead of taking you back to Mexico and delivering you up to Major Sandos, who you know, with the evidence I hold, would at once order you hanged, or shot, as you most richly deserve."

"Your reward is a liberal one, therefore, and my advice to you is to take the five hundred you have in your belt, along with what other gold you have robbed people of, and get out of Texas."

"In fact, you had better seek other scenes in Mexico than those you are known in, as Major Sandos will be on the watch for you."

"Go, Pablo, and sin no more, is my advice, unless you wish to dance at the end of a rope."

"Here are your weapons, and I shall watch you ride away."

"Look back, and it will be worse for you than Lot's wife. Now, git!"

The peon at once leaped into his saddle, and, with a little malediction, rode away, going across the ford he had come, back into Mexico, while he did not look back until he had the river between himself and the Texan.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TEXAN WAYLAID.

TEXAS JACK watched the peon until he saw him cross the river and move away at a rapid pace, not, however, taking the trail to the headquarters camp of the lanceros.

He was hidden from view himself, so that the peon might suspect that he had gone at once on his way when he saw him take to the ford.

"He takes the trail down the river, and has some motive in that, else he would go to the camp of Captain Corsala and force from him more money before going away, for he will not now dare remain where Major Sandos could lay his hands upon him."

"Well, I have made a discovery that carries out my theory against Captain Corsala, and I know well what the result will be when I report to the major, for he is not one to treat the captain's crime lightly."

"Now to go to my own home, and then to take a run up into the Indian country to see if they are quiet, or threatening trouble."

With this Texas Jack ate his noonday lunch, and mounting, rode away on a trail that would lead him to his ranch.

It was just sunset when he was looking about for a good place to camp, and came across the trail of a single horse—a very fresh trail, not made half an hour before, and the horse was being urged at a gallop, though his tracks showed that he was tired.

One thing about the tracks caught the keen eye of the Texan, and this was the peculiar form of one of the tracks, showing that the left fore-hoof was very narrow, much more so than the other three.

A smile lighted up the Texan's face as he noted this, and he muttered:

"I have seen the horse that made those tracks and not very long ago either."

"I'm in my usual luck to have come upon this trail, and I'll take a hand in the little game in which the rider thinks he is playing a lone hand."

"We shall see, for he knows this country

well, and I about know just where he will camp to-night and lie in wait."

"Come, old fellow, we don't camp here, but make a number of miles more and cannot stick to the trail either, as we have to flank," said Texas Jack, patting his horse affectionately.

Mounting once more, he turned off the trail and began to bend to the right.

It was a long ride, and in some places a rough one, and when he at last halted it was after midnight.

"We have camped here before, Pard, and you know there is plenty of grass for you, but I will have to take a cold supper, for, hungry as I am, it will not do to light a fire."

"We are this much nearer our journey's end, if we have had a hard night's ride of it."

He rubbed his horse down well, watered him and staked him out to feed where there was grass in plenty.

Then he ate a cold "snack," spread his serapes and was soon fast asleep.

The skies were brightening when he awoke and at once walked down into a valley through which the trail ran which he would have taken had he come straight on.

He glanced at the trail and muttered:

"No, he has not passed, so he must be lying in wait where I supposed that he would."

Staking out his horse on a fresh plat of grass, he threw his rifle across his shoulder and went on foot up the trail.

It ascended toward a ridge that was wild, desolate and rough, and as he drew near the summit, advancing with the greatest caution, he saw off to one side a horse staked out, and with bridle and saddle hanging on a tree near him.

"That tells the story," muttered Texas Jack, and he continued on toward where the trail wound through a rocky pass.

Making a detour, he reached the top of the rocky ridge, and then crept along it on hands and knees, his rifle strapped to his back, until he could look over into the pass.

What he saw there seemed to please him, for a smile lighted up his handsome face.

He continued to look for quite a while, as though enjoying the scene, and apparently in no hurry to depart.

What he saw was a man seated behind a boulder on one side of the pass, and directly beneath the Texan, not thirty feet distant.

The man would rise every minute and peer over the boulder as though expecting some one, and then resume his seat upon a small rock.

His rifle leant by his side, and his revolvers lay upon the rock in front of him.

"Getting tired of waiting for me, Pablo?"

A yell broke from the lips of the watcher.

It was a cry of terror and surprise mingled, and he sprung to his feet looking about him for the one who had spoken.

"I've got a bead on you, Pablo, so don't get excited and do anything rash."

"Sit down on that rock there, away from your weapons."

"Do you hear?"

The man glanced up now and saw a rifle pressing over the rock above him, and covering him.

With a little Spanish oath he obeyed.

"Now, Pablo, you concluded you would make a bold play before you left the country, so you crossed the river, rode like the devil to a lower ford, recrossed and came here to head me off and kill me."

CHAPTER XX.

A FORCED GIFT.

"You felt very sure," continued the Texan, speaking in the same unmoved voice, "that I was coming to my ranch, and you knew that this was the driest and best trail, for you knew the country well."

"You came into the trail at a point which you supposed I would reach after dark, and so would not see your trail."

"You calculated well, for I got there at sunset, yet saw your trail."

"I accidentally noticed this morning the strange shape of the left fore foot of your horse, and as you rode away I marked his tracks."

"It served me well, for it told me I was to be ambushed."

"So I flanked you, Pablo, and now I am up and you are down."

"You will not kill me, Texas Jack?" pleaded the peon.

"I am just considering whether I will or not."

"Mercy, senor!"

"If I was the brute you are you would beg in vain; but I am no assassin, and though you deserve death I shall let you go."

"Thanks, senor, my heartfelt thanks."

"Don't get excited, Pablo, as you might forget and move too near your weapons, you know."

"Could I be so cruel to one who is good to me?"

"Yes; and worse; but I do not intend to let you go without punishment."

"Mercy, senor."

"I could take your horse and outfit, and send you away on foot, with only your rifle and a serape."

"But I will not deprive you of them, or leave you afoot."

"Now, I have an old Confederate friend who is poor, and he lives in Mexico."

"I often help him with a few dollars, but now the chance arises for me to give him a handsome present of five hundred pesos in gold."

"Oh, senor!"

"You have two belts of gold, I noticed when searching you to-day, and one contains the five hundred pesos paid you by Captain Corsala."

"Would you rob me, senor?"

"We will not call it a robbery, Pablo, simply a present from you to my old rebel pard."

"So take off that belt of gold and lay it upon that rock!"

"Senor, I—"

"Obey me!"

"I beg you, senor—"

"Give up that gold, or accept some of my lead!"

"I will, senor; I will."

The belt was unbuckled and placed upon the rock with a groan.

"Now, Pablo, leave your weapons where they are, and strike out down that trail."

"Go until you reach the valley, and if you halt sooner, I will urge your going with a bullet, and my rifle will kill over half a mile."

"You are going to take all I have?"

"Oh, no; I am going to send you to the valley, and then you can come back."

"You will find your weapons left there, your horse at your camp, and all except that belt of gold, and that goes to my old friend, as I said."

"I shall at once go to my ranch and start my cowboys off on the search for you, and if they catch you in Texas they will know what to do, while I shall soon visit Major Sandos, and if you are about his camp he will also know how to rid the country of you."

"Now go, Pablo, and remember if you cross my path again it will be for a life and death encounter between us."

"Now go!"

"Curse you, Texas Jack, I can but obey now, but some day we will meet again, and—"

"Tra-la-la, Pablo!"

The man moved away quickly, and started down the trail at a brisk pace, for he had caught the eye of the Texan, and feared he might go too far in provoking him.

Texas Jack watched him until he had nearly reached the valley, then he descended to the pass, took up the belt of gold, and said:

"This will be a good present for Jose Farada, and he shall have it."

"It was given the peon as blood-money by Captain Corsala, and I did right to take it from him and devote it to a good purpose."

"Now I'll go into hiding, and see if Pablo takes my advice."

Texas Jack soon found a hiding-place, and half an hour after he saw the peon return, and, with maledictions loud and deep seize his weapons when he saw that his belt of gold was gone, and then make for his camp.

Saddling his horse, he mounted and rode back on his trail, evidently anxious to get across the Rio Grande with all dispatch.

Texas Jack watched him until convinced he would no longer tarry in Texas, and then he returned to where he had left his horse, built a fire, cooked his breakfast, and then saddling up, pushed rapidly on for his ranch, several hours' ride from the scene of Pablo's ambush.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TEXAN AT HOME.

It was a wild, yet very beautiful country that opened up before Texas Jack as he neared the home he had sought for all his own in the midst of a wilderness, and where deadly dangers surrounded him.

He had taken possession of one of the old Spanish Missions, deserted many long years before and fallen to ruin.

Like all the old Missions, it had been well located for defense and the beauty of its surroundings.

It was on a hill overlooking a swiftly-flowing stream with precipitous banks, and the river there made a great bend, forming a peninsula, across the other end of which was a rude barrier of fallen trees, fencing in many thousand acres where the cattle of the ranch and ponies strayed at will, feeding upon the luxuriant grass that carpeted the meadow lands.

In one end of the old ruin were several rooms that were in fair condition and had been repaired and improved by the Texan as his living quarters.

The old garden the padres had tilled had been again cultivated, and produced the finest of vegetables, and chickens, ducks and a few sheep roving about gave the place a very homelike look.

Back of the Mission a short distance was the little graveyard of the padres, but the headstones were too time-worn to trace out the inscriptions upon them.

A few newly-made graves there told the story of several hard-fought battles with the Indians, in which Texas Jack's Cowboy Rangers had bitten the dust.

It was to this home that Texas Jack wended his way after leaving the spot where Pablo the peon had been in ambush to take his life.

He was seen afar off and a curling smoke told him that the noonday meal was being prepared for him, so that he knew he would find a welcome.

Crossing the river at a ford, a mile or more down the bend, he made his way to the barrier of fallen trees, where there was a motte, protected by bars, and rode rapidly on to the Mission.

As he did so he saw three horsemen wending their way there also, coming from the meadowlands, while a herd of several hundred cattle were feeding, and near them about a hundred horses of all kinds and conditions.

The three horsemen were Texas Jack's cowboys, and daring, rough-riding, hard-fighting young fellows they were, employed, not so much as guards for the cattle, as to aid in defending them from Indians and Mexican raiders.

They were going up to the Mission for dinner and seeing their chief they greeted him with shouts and waving of sombreros.

"Well, Cap'n Jack, we are glad to see you, as we begun to feel anxious about you, for you were due several days ago," said one of the trio.

"I have had several close calls since I left, pards, but got through all right."

"How about the other fellows, cap'n?" significantly asked one of the cowboys.

"Well, one was not so lucky as I was, for I broke his neck with a lariat, though it was an accident."

"Turned up his toes all the same, though?"

"Yes, but is the Tonkaway here?"

"Up at the Mission."

"And Boss is cooking the dinner, I am glad to see, from the smoke."

"Yes, sir, and if he saw you coming, and I guess he did, for he's always watching when you are away, we'll have something extra, sure."

"I can do justice to it, whatever it may be."

"I tell you, Cap'n Jack, them two, the nigger and the Injun, do love you same as though you was brothers."

"Why, they is uneasy all the time you is away."

"And I regard them both with equal affection, boys, and I have cause to do so, as you know."

"Yes, they saved your life, we know; but you kept a gang from hanging the black one day, and saved the Tonkaway from being burned at the stake, so you are quits on the life-saving business."

"But both of them, Red Snake, the Tonkaway, and Boss, the black man, are a splendid pair to draw to."

"See, there's Boss now, watching for you."

As the cowboy spoke he pointed to where a negro of giant size, and dressed in buckskin, top-boots and a sombrero, stood in the door of the old Mission-room, used as a kitchen, regarding the approaching chief and his men.

Standing apart, and also regarding them, was an Indian, also of Herculean proportions, yet, like the negro, wiry, athletic and quick as a flash in his movements.

He was dressed in a gorgeous attire, wore the war-bonnet of a chief, and his face was noble, his manner commanding and dignified.

As Texas Jack dismounted before the Mission one of the cowboys took his horse, while the Tonkaway chief and Boss, the negro, both came forward with extended hands, the latter saying:

"I'm awful glad to see you back ag'in, Mar's Jack."

"Me glad, too," the Tonkaway said.

"And I am glad to get back; but Tonk, as soon as you have had dinner I wish you to go on a scout for me, taking your best horse and plenty of grub."

"In three days meet me at Deadman's Ford, on the Rio Grande, and I will be there with Boss, who is to go with me, and the cowboys will keep house for us until we get back."

"Now, Boss, what have you got for dinner?"

"Venison steak, bird pie, eggs, potatoes, onions, hoe-cake and coffee, Mars' Jack."

"Good enough for a king, and I am as hungry as a bear," and Texas Jack and the others were soon enjoying the feast Boss had set before them.

CHAPTER XXII.

THREE PARDS.

THE place of rendezvous appointed by Texas Jack with the Tonkaway, was known as Deadman's Ford on account of the very dangerous character of the crossing of the river, and the many who had lost their lives there.

On the American shore the banks were cut up with canyons, valleys and high hills, and there was a camping-place half-a-mile away known to the Texan and the Indian.

On account of its being such a dangerous crossing few persons attempted that ford, and it was, therefore, a very secluded spot to appoint a rendezvous.

The mission on which the Tonkaway had been sent by Texas Jack, was to reconnoiter the Indian country and note if there was any suspicion of a movement in force, or in small bands of raiders.

The day after his arrival at his ranch, Texas Jack left the three cowboys in charge, and accompanied by the negro, both mounted on splendid horses and carrying ample provisions, rode away from the Mission.

It was the Texan's desire to cover the ground that the Tonkaway chief did not in a reconnoissance, so that he could fully report to the colonel at Fort Blanco.

This he did, and upon the third day, as appointed, he rode into the secluded camp near Deadman's Ford, just an hour ahead of the red-skin.

"The Tonkaway is not here yet, Boss, but we will camp and make ourselves comfortable, for he will be along soon," said Texas Jack.

Boss was a splendid hand in making a camp, and he had gotten all in shape when the Tonkaway rode up, and said in his laconic way:

"Me here—Jack here, too—Boss also," said the red-skin with more dignity than English.

"Yes, Tonk, we are all here and ready for business."

"Sit down and we'll have dinner, then a smoke and follow with a pow-wow," said Texas Jack.

The dinner was soon over, then the Texan and Indian smoked their pipes in silence, while Boss looked to cleaning up after the meal.

Texas Jack always humored the Indian in his desire to smoke his pipe before he entered into a discussion.

It gave him time for thought, and it would not be a bad plan for our Congressmen to adopt, as they he would be better prepared for argument.

They have, it is true, the opening prayer for peace and good will of the chaplains of the House and Senate, and then go at it like the fabled Kilkenny cats, "peace and good will" being relegated to the rear as soon as the Amen is disposed of.

After some ten minutes of silent enjoyment of their pipes, Texas Jack said:

"Well, Tonk, you went on the trail into the Indian country?"

"Me go."

"And are the Comanches quiet or uneasy?"

"Heap uneasy, for moving to mountain village, and braves kill plenty of game."

"Ah, that means an intended war-trail, sure."

"Yes, Comanche big angry, heap mad about something."

"Git women and children safe in mountain village, have plenty food ready, getting ponies fat for long trail—mean bad toward pale-face."

"You went near their camp?"

"Red Snake went into their village, same as Comanche."

"Him know."

"I do not doubt that, for if there is a crook in your tongue, Tonkaway, I have never been able to find it."

"Now I wish you to go with me into Mexico, and I will send Boss to the fort with the information you bring."

"While I write the talking paper* you tell me all that you saw and heard."

Texas Jack got out a slip of paper and pencil, and wrote as follows, questioning Tonkaway closely the while:

"CAMP ON THE RIO GRANDE."

"Thursday."

"COLONEL FRANK ELWOOD:—

"DEAR SIR:—I send you herewith, by my colored comrade, Boss, information I deem urgent for you to receive."

"I obtained information after leaving the fort, of a plot against Major Sandos, which I will make known to him to-day, as I go at once into Mexico, and while there will pick up what information I can regarding the intended raid of Robber Rangers into Texas, and acquaint you with the facts."

"After discovering the plot against Major Sandos, and which he will make known to you, doubtless, I went to my ranch and dispatched my Indian comrade, the Tonkaway chief, into the Comanche country."

"He met me here an hour ago, and reports that the Indians are preparing to move their village on the range up to their mountain stronghold, that the braves are getting quantities of game, to lay up, and preparing their ponies for a long trail."

"They are beyond doubt intending a move in large force, but just where they intend to strike is yet to be found out, and I will notify you, as I shall take the trail at once upon my return from Mexico, where I do not expect to be delayed."

"With respect,

"TEXAS JACK."

Having finished this letter Boss was instructed to deliver it in person to Colonel Elwood, and then to return to the camp to await the coming back of the Texan and the Tonkaway from Mexico.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A BOLD VENTURE.

"Now, Tonkaway, you and I have got to go loaded for bear, so to speak, for we are to cross the Rio Grande," said Texas Jack, as he saw Boss cache the camp outfit, and ride away upon his mission to the fort.

* Indians call a letter a talking paper.

"Me ready."

"We may get scalped, Tonk."

"All same, have one scalp."

"Die some day—one time die," was the philosophical response.

"And we may get a scalp or two," and the Texan's eyes twinkled as he glanced at the Tonkaway, who responded laconically:

"Heap glad. Tonkaway love scalp bad pale-face, bad red-skin, bad Mexican."

Mounting their horses they rode down to the ford, which was the unfrequented one where Pablo had been held up, and crossing the river they were upon Mexican soil.

Both the Indian and Texan knew their danger, and were very cautious not to run upon lurking foes.

But none were seen, and they passed on into the country beyond.

Texas Jack was anxious to reach some timber where he knew there was a spring and secluded retreat, where they could remain until night, and then go on rapidly to the quarters of Major Sandos.

The major had his quarters in a hacienda, and a couple of miles away was another one occupied by the officers, while the regiment was camped near, or rather a part of it.

The regiment had been divided into five battalions, camped at as many different points along the border, the main force being that under command of Captain Corsala, and near which were the headquarters of Major Sandos, the latter being near the center of his command.

From the upper to the lower battalions was a distance considerably over fifty miles, and the major made his rounds twice a week, for the duties of the lancers were arduous and important, as the Rio Grande border had to be guarded against lawless raiders from the Texan shore, Indians and Mexican outlaws dashing over into the American country.

Texas Jack realized fully that, if caught over on the Mexican side, he might be dealt with severely, without being taken to an officer to decide upon his case, and so he was anxious to get to the major's quarters unseen.

When it was growing dark, he and the Tonkaway mounted their horses and dashed away at a rapid gallop.

So far they had not seen a soul, and they were nearing the hacienda where the major had his headquarters, when they dashed suddenly upon half a hundred horsemen.

There was no chance to wheel and retreat, and so Texas Jack made the best of it, and said in a low tone:

"Tonk, we are in for it; but they are lancers I hope."

And lancers they were, and soon the Texan and the Indian were halted and an officer called out in Spanish:

"Bring them along to my camp, and kill them if they attempt to escape."

"Is not that Captain Corsala?" asked Texas Jack in Spanish, addressing a young lieutenant.

"It is."

"Then please say to him that I am going to see Major Sandos, for whom I have a message, senior."

The words were repeated to Captain Corsala who replied:

"That is but an excuse to escape."

"They are spies and I will deal with them."

So on to the quarters of Captain Corsala they were taken, and there the Texan and Indian were led before him by the lieutenant and a guard of lancers.

"Ah! I have seen you before, Texan?" said the captain.

"You have, senior."

"Where was it?"

"The day of the runaway, when Major Sandos was thrown from the ambulance."

"Yes, and you shot two of my best horses."

"I did so to save the major's life, senior."

"Bah! there was no danger, really, for the horses had stopped of their own accord when you fired."

"Being out of sight in the rear, senior, you could not see, so do not know what occurred."

"Hah! do you dare contradict me?"

"I believe my eyesight, senior, before the word of any man."

"And I suppose you are in Mexico to get a reward from Sandos for saving his life?"

"It is false, for I take no man's blood money."

"I am here to see Major Sandos, and I have a message of importance for him."

"What is it?"

"That I shall make known to him."

"From whom is it?"

"That is his affair, and mine."

"By heavens, but I'll make it my business to string you and that red-skin up as a spy," shouted Corsala savagely.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE CAPTAIN'S THREAT.

TEXAS JACK laughed at this threat of Captain Corsala, and the irate officer said:

"What! do you defy me?"

"You are on your own soil, senior, and in command of this camp while, with your hundred lancers about you, of course you have the power to carry out your threat."

"But I am an American citizen, and Texas Jack is too well known to let him pass out of life with no inquiry as to the manner of his death, so a day of reckoning will come to you, Captain Corsala."

"Who will demand it of me?" was the sneering reply.

"Well, Colonel Elwood of Fort Blanco knows of my coming here, and Major Sandos is expecting me, I may say."

"If I fail to materialize, then inquiries will be made, and from what I have heard you are not a popular commander, and your men will report that Texas Jack and his Tonkaway pard were executed without a trial, and that will look so black for you that even your name, rank and money cannot save you when your Government is called to account for your act."

"Who will call my Government to account for such as you and that red-skin?"

"The United States."

"Caramba! it will do no good."

"It did when we called you to account in 1846 and General Scott carried your capitol by storm."

"We have learned more of the art of war since then, senior."

"But I know that you were a rebel in the late war, and the United States will not protect you."

"Don't you believe it, for if I was a rebel, I am again a citizen of the United States, and Texas is a State of the Union, so don't fool yourself, Captain Corsala, for our Government has a record for protecting its citizens."

"But a rebel, no."

"I am a Texan at least, and should the Government not protect me, Texas will avenge me."

"A State against Mexico!"

"You are away off in your history, Senior Captain, if you do not recall that Texas gained its independence as the Lone Star Republic, against all that Mexico could do, and there are upon our honor pages the names of Crockett, Houston, Bowie, Carson, and others that Mexico should not forget."

A bitter oath was Corsala's answer to this, and then he said, savagely:

"Well my Government allows border officers discretionary powers, and you are here, at night, in Mexico, with only your word to prove that you are not spies, and I shall use my authority and have you both shot at sunrise."

"For what crime, Captain Corsala?"

All started at the deep-toned query, and into the room strode Major Miguel Sandos.

"Ah, Senior Major, you were not announced, or you would have been properly received," said Captain Corsala, his face paling, and his manner showing that he was greatly nettled.

"It was my command not to be announced, Senior Captain Corsala, as you had not retired for the night."

"How can I serve you, senior?"

"You have two prisoners here?"

"Yes, senior, spies, taken by my men to-night, within my lines."

"Your lines, senior, are the lines of the

regiment over which I have the honor to be in command."

"I do not consider it necessary to report a simple capture to you, as it has not been done in the past."

"A simple capture of those you knew to be Mexican outlaws, no; but these are men from across the border. American citizens."

"Who, spying in Mexico, must be looked on as outlaws."

"If proven."

"I feel that they are."

"On what proof?"

"They have no proof that they are not."

"What do they say?"

"The Texan says that he is not a spy."

"I said that I was going to see Major Sandos, for whom I had a message, senior," spoke up Texas Jack.

"Why was not this man sent to me, then, Captain Corsala?"

"I did not believe him."

"I am to be the judge, and let me tell you that you have made a great mistake, as I know this gentleman to be a prominent Texan, a Ranger, a Government scout and guide, and one whose word is to be believed."

"His companion I do not know, but he is an Indian, a Tonkaway, I believe."

"He is, senior, a Tonkaway, and my friend and comrade."

"He came with me at my request, and I was on my way to see you when Captain Corsala captured us and brought us here."

"Very well, Senior Texas Jack, you and your comrade will return with me to my quarters," said Major Sandos.

CHAPTER XXV.

HACIENDA BUENA VISTA.

CAPTAIN CORSALA's face showed his chagrin at the coming of Major Sandos, and his coolly taking the two prisoners out of his hands.

He was not one to yield without a strong remonstrance for what he deemed his rights, and to the surprise of the two officers present, and his men, he said:

"Do I understand, Major Sandos, that you take my prisoners from me, thus receiving the credit of their capture?"

Major Sandos turned quickly and replied:

"These men are not prisoners, senior, and you arrested them on their way to my quarters."

"They have nothing to do with you, you nothing to do with them, and I am responsible for their coming and going."

The captain bowed, but his face was flushed, and he replied:

"Then I shall make my report, sir, to the general, that you relieved me of all responsibility."

"You will make your report to me, sir, as your commander, and I will indorse it as I deem best and forward it."

"Do you deny my right to appeal to the general?"

"Unless you desire to make a specific charge against me, yes, for in all else you must report to me."

"May I ask Senior Major Sandos why I am honored with his visit to-night?"

"It was reported to me that you had arrested two prisoners, within the sentinel line about my quarters, and brought them on to your camp."

"I came to see who they were, and by what authority you took upon yourself the responsibility of assuming my rights."

"I came just in time to hear your sentence of death against two citizens of the United States upon an imaginary charge you made yourself against them."

"Had you shot those men, Senior Corsala, Mexico would no longer have been your abiding place, unless it was beneath its soil," and Major Sandos, now thoroughly angry, wheeled on his heel, and calling to Texas Jack and the Indian to accompany him, left the quarters of Captain Corsala, whose face was white with passion, and who dared not trust himself to speak as he had the good sense, splendid soldier and strict disciplinarian that he was, to know that he must keep within bounds in addressing his commander.

"The guard is dismissed for Major Sandos assumes all responsibility," he said calmly,

as his commander and the two whom he had saved walked out of the room.

The guard marched out, secretly rejoicing at their captain's defeat, for he was far from being popular, and more, they well knew that he was wrong in his treatment of Texas Jack and the Indian, for the fame of the gallant Texan was well known in Mexico, and stories of his daring deeds were told around the bivouacs in the Mexican Army as well as in the American.

Mounting his horse, when he had ordered the animals of the Texan and Indian brought up, Major Sandos led the way out of the plaza of the hacienda where Captain Corsala had his quarters, followed by the escort that had accompanied him.

He called to Texas Jack to ride by his side, the Tonkaway dropping back behind them, and a rapid gallop of a couple of miles brought them to the elegant old Mexican home which had belonged to the Sandos family for years, but, with Miguel Sandos the only heir, it had long been deserted save by the servants and cowboys, as his service had been in distant parts of Mexico, and since boyhood, until he established his quarters there, he had not returned to the place of his birth.

It was a grand old structure, large and as strongly built as a fort, in fact at the four corners, for it was built in a square, with a large plaza in the center, were turrets in which six-pounder cannon were mounted, and there was a strong upper wall to protect defenders.

On the inner side, wide piazzas extended all around, opening upon the plaza, which was really a flower-garden, where orange and lemon-trees and beautiful foliage afforded shade.

On the east side was a wing, connected by a covered way, where there was another structure, and here were the servants' quarters on the second floor and the stables for the special horses below, while at a short distance were the other out buildings of the ranch.

The escort of the major were camped in the annex building, the staff-officers having one side of the main structure, and a pleasanter abiding-place could not have been found.

Hundreds of horses were upon the ranch, and thousands of cattle, the hacienda was handsomely furnished, the larder well stocked, and the major lived like a prince, for he possessed a large estate.

Fruit orchards, vegetable gardens, poultry yards, sheep corrals and vineyards were near the hacienda, and many were the fair señoritas in Mexico who had heard of Buena Vista Hacienda, and longed to become its mistress by winning the heart of its handsome master.

It was beautifully located upon an eminence, with a swiftly flowing stream between the main building and the annex, with a grand park near, and all about it to make life luxurious and enjoyable.

And thither went Texas Jack and the Tonkaway with the Mexican major.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE STORY TOLD.

WHEN Major Sandos arrived at his elegant home, he ordered the horses of the Texan and Tonkaway stabled, and the latter to be given a good supper and bed, while Texas Jack accompanied him to his own quarters.

Jack had been there before, on his way out of Mexico after the scene in the village, and had had supper with the major, it will be remembered.

But he could not but regard with admiring glances the elegant, quaint old furniture and luxury stamped upon all around him, as he took a seat in an easy chair, while the major said:

"My supper was postponed by my ride over to Corsala's, but I am glad now, as I will have your company, señor."

And the two sat down to a most tempting meal, where the service was of massive silver and the servants thoroughly trained to their duties.

Supper being over, they adjourned to the library, and the major placed a box of fragrant Mexitillas before them and said:

"Now, señor, we can talk, for we are all alone."

"You came here to see me, you said?"

"Yes, Major Sandos. I came to tell you that I had met Pablo, the peon, as I said I would, and here is the bogus letter you gave him addressed to Colonel Elwood."

"Ah! this means that you got the best of him, and I am glad, for I was anxious about you, as inquiry regarding that man showed me that he was one of the worst desperadoes in Mexico."

"I lassoed him, sir, so that gave me the advantage, and when I talked the matter over with him I soon found that he was for sale to the highest bidder, so I bought him."

"You got him to confess, then?"

"I did, sir."

"Then I will refund the amount you paid."

Texas Jack laughed in his merry way, and taking from about his waist a belt, he held it out with the remark:

"Here, señor, is a belt containing the first payment of Captain Corsala to Pablo, five hundred pesos."

"Indeed! then he is guilty?" and the major looked deeply pained.

"Oh, yes, sir; of course he is; but I found Pablo had two belts in searching him, and I supposed this one had only what the captain had given him."

"You took it from him?"

"I did, sir, in punishment, as I will explain later."

"I took it to give to my old Rebel comrade, at whose home I was when I lassoed the man about to kill you."

"I intend to give it to him, and I am not sorry to find that there are a couple of hundred more in the belt, for my friend will be that much better off, and he is poor."

"I left the fellow Pablo a belt with far more in it than this one has, and it was all stolen you may be sure, and this is blood-money, paid by Captain Corsala for your life."

"I will tell you the story, señor, just as it is, and why I punished Pablo later by taking this belt of gold instead of his worthless life, for I allowed him to go that time."

Then Texas Jack told to his deeply-interested listener the story of Pablo's capture, his release, the ambush he had planned to kill the Texan, and what had followed.

He then went on to say

"I frightened him by saying my cowboys would be on his track, and that I was coming to see you, so as to prevent his daring to come to the camp of Captain Corsala."

"He is doubtless already far from him, señor, so he is out of the way; but here is a proof against the real assassin, as he tried to be by buying Pablo, which he cannot deny," and Jack handed over the paper which Captain Corsala had given the peon to insure the balance of his bribe.

The major read it several times over and then said sadly:

"It is confirmation beyond dispute, for he has a peculiar signature and I know it well."

"Alas! that a man who was well born, is well off in this world's goods, has a rank as captain at thirty, and much to live for, should blacken his life by such a deed, should wish to get a brother officer in his grave to wear his rank, and because he was angered with me for calling him a coward, that day I went to the rescue of Colonel Elwood, would, instead of facing me, seek to have another take my life."

"I feel deeply the fall of such a man; but I am determined that he shall answer for this, and I shall waive his criminal act and hold him responsible for it, though, for the sake of his family and the service, I will keep secret his heinous deed."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CHALLENGE.

MAJOR SANDOS had spoken with intense feeling, for the crime of Captain Corsala seemed to have made a deeper impression upon him than the fact that he had plotted against his life.

"You must be my guest for some days, señor, as long as you can spare, and I wish you to be one of my friends in this affair."

"I thank you, Major Sandos, but I must

return to Texas to-morrow, as duty demands it," and Texas Jack told of the warning he had sent to Colonel Elwood, adding:

"I wish to ride to the village in the morning, and ask you for a pass that will protect me, as I cannot risk delay, and I desire to give to my old comrade this belt of gold."

"Then I must return to Texas."

"Señor, you shall have the pass, and I desire you to stop here on your return, and I will go with you to the river, in fact across it, as I prefer this meeting with Corsala to come off an American soil, as then there will be no complication on investigation, further than a report of the duel."

"You are determined to meet him, then, sir?"

"Oh yes."

"He is not worthy of it."

"True, yet I cannot allow such a man to remain in the army; and if I did not meet him, he would still retain his rank and position."

"If I preferred charges against him, of course he would not only be at once tried, but shot, and for his family's sake I do not wish this."

"If he should kill you, señor?"

"I must take my chances, but I will seek revenge even from my grave, as I shall ask you to then go to him and threaten him with exposure if he does not resign."

"I'll do it, señor—in fact, I'll save him the trouble of resigning and avenge you in my own way."

The major laughed, but replied:

"He is a deadly hand with both revolver and sword, and our chances are even, perhaps slightly in his favor; but, if I fall, such a man must not disgrace the service, and then I shall leave him to you, for did I tell of his infamy to a Mexican officer all would be exposed and the disgrace fall upon his aged parents and his lovely sister, whom I know well."

"So it is, señor, I wish you to second me, along with Captain Verona, who will also be my friend."

"I cannot refuse, señor, yet I must be in Texas to-morrow night."

"I will arrange it then," and the major gave a shrill whistle; and a servant appeared.

"Send my orderly to me."

The orderly soon appeared and Major Sandos said:

"Go at once to Captain Corsala's quarters, present my compliments and say to him that I desire to see him immediately upon a most important matter."

The orderly departed and Major Sandos said:

"I wish you to hear what I have to say to him, señor."

In less than an hour, and before midnight, Captain Corsala arrived and was ushered into the room where the major and Texas Jack sat.

"My friend, Captain Jack Omohundro, of the Texas Rangers, Captain Corsala."

The captain bowed stiffly and with a sarcastic smile upon his lips.

"Sit down, Corsala, and hear what I have to say to you."

"I prefer to stand."

"As you please, I asked only because you were under my roof."

"So I thought."

"But you sent for me upon a most important matter, I was told."

"Yes, most important."

"You considered that I offered an insult some months ago, when you refused to accompany me to the rescue of Colonel Elwood, and I called you a coward?"

"I did, and but for your being wounded and exciting my sympathy, I should have never overlooked it, and it has rankled in my breast ever since."

"Let me now give you full cause for feeling insulted for I desire to express to you my candid opinion in very few words, in fact, I denounce you, before my Texan friend here, as a cowardly desperado, one who would strike a brother officer in the back, one who, with not the courage to face him, and settle your grievance, hired an assassin to take his life."

"I hope that I make myself fully understood, Señor Corsala."

Major Sandos was perfectly cool, and spoke with telling distinctness.

Corsala turned to the hue of the dead, leaned heavily upon a table with one hand, and his lips quivered, his eyes blazed.

But he did not interrupt the speaker until he had finished, and then hissed forth:

"Yes, I understand."

"You are jealous of my attention to that American beauty, Estelle Elwood, and wish to insult me, that I may call you out and give you the chance to kill me."

"Now, Corsala, you are a liar as well as a cowardly coyote," and the words flung in his teeth stung to the quick.

"Miguel Sandos, your death alone can wipe out the stain of your words, and I demand that you give me satisfaction."

"That is just what I wish, Senor Corsala, satisfaction for your cowardly attempt to have Pablo the peon assassinate me."

"Hold! I know all, I have your confession of guilt here, and your hired assassin has confessed all and fled."

"Before this gentleman, who is pledged to keep this secret of your crime, I tell you that I know you, and why I forced you to challenge me; but, for the sake of your parents and beautiful sister, I will not expose you, and the cause of quarrel can remain unknown to all save us three, and in fact, it will be supposed to be the old affair which the men reported around, I learn, of my accusing you of being a coward."

"In truth, let them even think you angered by my taking your prisoners last night, and so the secret dies with you or with me."

"You have challenged me, and so I will refer you to my friend here, and Captain Alberto Verona, whom I will send for."

A servant was summoned, Captain Verona sent for and being introduced to Texas Jack, the major said:

"Senor, Captain Corsala seeks an affair with me, and I refer him to you and my friend here, Captain Omohundro."

"Please arrange promptly for to-morrow at sunset on the Texan side of the river, any weapons you please."

"Captain Corsala will send his friends to you."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

JACK'S COMRADE.

CAPTAIN CORSALA made no reply in answer to Major Sandos's explanation, but bowed to Captain Verona and Texas Jack, saluted his superior, and departed from the room and the hacienda.

"I am sorry, Senor Major, that Corsala has seen fit to press that old quarrel, which was camp rumor some months ago," said Captain Verona, who was a fine-looking young officer, a favorite with all in the army, and the idol of the ladies.

He was the adjutant of the regiment of lancers, and, with an aide, the quartermaster, commissary and ordnance officer, each ranking as lieutenant, formed the staff of the command, which Sandos being in charge of in the absence of his two superior officers, attached them to his headquarters.

"My dear Verona, do not be worried, for matters have been shaping their way of late so that a meeting between Corsala and I could not be avoided."

"To-night he arrested my friend here and his comrade in a most high-handed manner, and what I said to him he resented as an insult and at once challenged me."

"He is a fool."

"Oh, no; and yes, he doubtless is," thoughtfully said the major.

Then he continued:

"Senor Omohundro here, of the Rangers, is compelled to return to the other side of the river by to-morrow night, and duty calls him to the village in the morning, so please arrange to meet Corsala across the Rio Grande at Deadman's Ford, the duel to take place just before sunset."

"I do not care what weapons you select, and you may order an ambulance to the ford on this side of the river, for one of us, perhaps both, will be brought back dead or badly wounded."

"He is a dead-shot, senor."

"So I have heard; but then, so am I."

"How about swords? though he is a dangerous hand with the blade, too."

"Let us try pistols first, and, they failing,

resort to swords; but the duel must be to the death."

And Major Sandos spoke with deep determination that showed he was in deadly earnest.

"I wish no advantage over you, senor, and if I wrong Corsala I am sorry, yet I fear he is one to accomplish by trickery what he cannot do fairly."

"You do not regard Corsala very highly, then, Verona?"

"No, senor, though I would not make the charge to others; but he is a man to fear and shun, and if I was certain of some suspicions I have regarding him, I would prevent this meeting by flatly saying you should not fight one I did not deem a gentleman."

"Unfortunately I have no proof of what I only suspect, so I have held my peace until now, and I trust what I say ends here, for a man has no right to make an accusation unless he can back up his words."

"It will go no further, Verona, and we will waive all suspicions against Corsala and meet him, for this duel must be fought—is it not so, Senor Omohundro?"

"I consider that it is a necessity, senor; but taking Captain Verona's suspicions as true, we will see to it that Captain Corsala plays a square game with you," was Texas Jack's reply.

With a parting glass of wine as a night-cap, the major and his two friends separated, Texas Jack being conducted to a most charming guest-chamber.

But he was awakened at dawn, as he requested, and the major had an early breakfast with him, when, leaving the Tonkaway to await his return, and riding one of the hacienda horses to give his own a rest, he started for the village to visit his old Confederate comrade.

With a pass from Major Sandos, and mounted upon a splendid horse, Texas Jack felt no dread, and the miles were left quickly behind him.

In a little over a couple of hours he had made the ride of twenty miles, and drew rein at Mexique Soto's humble home, with his horse panting like a hound.

The animal was his first care, and having looked well to him, he said:

"Now Mexique, old pard, we will have a talk together."

"It was too daring of you, Jack, to come here after your affair of the other day, for there is bad blood in these people against you," said Mexique Soto, a Mexican of fifty, and who had a noble face.

Once he was a man of wealth and influence, but he had met with misfortune, and going to Texas had enlisted in the Confederate Army, serving with distinction to the end and winning a commission.

Several times he had been wounded, and a shot in the lungs had made him a sufferer for life, so that poor and almost friendless, he had returned to a small home he owned in Mexico, to spend the last years of his life, and rest when dead.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE OLD REBEL'S WARNING.

"I do not come unprotected this time, Pard Mexique, for I have a pass from Major Sandos," answered Texas Jack, in response to the Mexican's words.

"Yes, the splendid officer you befriended; but his pass will not save you from the knife or bullet of a Robber Ranger, and they frequent this village often, for many of them have kindred here."

"And most of them appear to belong to the Ranchero King's band."

"That is the strangest part of it, Jack; but then he employs all of a hundred and fifty cowboys on his ranches, and out of that number of men of their stripe in Mexico you may look upon one-third as desperadoes."

"Very true; but you don't think he winks at their lawless deeds, do you?"

"I should hate to do so for he has been good to me."

"And why should he, for he has nothing to gain by their lawlessness and much to lose."

"No, I have heard that he spares no man in his employ whom he knows to be guilty of a crime."

"I am glad to hear this of him, for I was prejudiced against him I admit, and only because his voice reminded me of that of a Mexican guerrilla chief who once captured me and came very nearly hanging me."

"It was a coincidence only, Jack."

"I hope so, for the sake of the Ranchero King."

"But have you any news for me?"

"Yes, I am sure that a band of raiders are forming to cross into Texas some night within the next ten days, for I have picked up enough to feel that a raid is intended."

"You know I have pretended deafness ever since my return, and going around among the neighbors I pick up much I am not supposed to hear."

"I am particularly friendly with the kin-folk of those whom I am sure are the Robber Rangers, and from what I have heard they are going to rendezvous at Sand Cliff Ford, and make a dash for the settlement seven miles away, the night the Government wagon-train arrives there with stores, and they have heard that a United States Army paymaster will be along to pay off the soldiers at Blanco, so when you expect that train will be the time to prepare for the raiders."

"I have heard of the train's coming, and the paymaster will be along with it too."

"It will be due in the settlement in about two weeks, and branch off at the Springs a couple of miles the other side, taking the inland trail up to Blanco, so will camp at the Springs, or near them one night."

"The river trail would be the best, yet the most dangerous, just on account of raiders from Mexico."

"And is the train well guarded?"

"I heard at the fort that there were thirty wagons, a drove of three hundred mules including those in the teams, some two-score horses for a light battery, several ambulances, and the paymaster's outfit, with a lieutenant and a dozen cavalymen as an escort."

"Say fifty men along all told?"

"Yes."

"Not enough to stand off forty or fifty Ranger Robbers who surprise them at night, for their first fire will kill half the number and demoralize the balance."

"They can loot the train, rob the paymaster, and run off the horses and mules in a couple of hours, getting into the mountains on this side near Sand Cliff Ford by daylight."

"You are just right, Mexique, and no chances must be taken."

"No, and you are forearmed, being forewarned."

"That is half the battle, old pard."

"But now I have something to say to you."

"Out with it, Jack."

"You owe a hundred pesos on your home here?"

"Yes, just that, and but for your kindness I would have lost it."

"Well, I have a present for you, one that will enable you to pay that money, spend fifty in making yourself more comfortable, and have half a thousand to live on."

"Oh, Jack!"

"I mean it."

"But you are not in a condition to spare it."

"But it does not come from me."

"Who then?"

"Why, a gentleman whom I had dealings with, and I got him to present it to me for you."

"Bless his noble heart!"

"Blast his ugly picture!"

"What, Jack?"

"It was Pablo, the peon, whom you know."

"He got some blood-money from a man to do some red work, but slipped up on it."

"I caught him with the spoils, and he ambushed me, so I charged him toll to get away with his life."

"This is the money, and I guess you won't mind spending it."

"You bet I won't, for your handling it has taken off the hoodoo, Jack, and God bless you," and the voice of the old soldier trembled as he spoke.

An hour after, Texas Jack mounted his horse and dashed away again for Buena Vista Hacienda, anxious to reach there before noon.

CHAPTER XXX.

AN ADVENTURE ON THE TRAIL.

WHEN half-way to the hacienda Texas Jack saw far ahead upon the trail a party of horsemen approaching.

He felt that there was safety in Major Sandos's pass, and yet he might be delayed, and that must not be.

He had promised to be back for an early dinner, so that he could start with Major Sandos and Captain Verona for the scene of the duel across Dead Man's Ford, and they were anxious to arrive there for an hour's rest before the encounter.

So he turned off the trail to avoid meeting the horsemen, and rode rapidly toward some timber where he could hide until they had passed.

He reached the timber, and was riding slowly through it, when he came to a ridge that commanded a view of the country for several miles beyond.

To his surprise, he saw two horses hitched to a *pinon* tree behind a group of rocks, and by which the trail ran.

Taking his glass, it revealed to him two men crouching among the rocks, with their rifles ready.

Then he saw, a mile away, a horseman coming along the trail that must lead him directly by the rocks where the men were beyond all doubt lying in ambush.

Texas Jack always thought and acted quickly.

He saw that there was a water-wash leading from near the timber up to within a hundred yards of the place of ambush.

Could he gain the wash unseen, he could ride to within easy range of the two men.

He would make the attempt, for a second look through his glass revealed to him who the horseman was.

He at once rode toward the wash, and gained it unseen he felt sure, for the men had not moved.

He rode rapidly along it, the soft sand giving back no sound, threw himself from the saddle when it lessened in depth so that he would be seen if he remained mounted, and then went along on foot until he was compelled to reveal himself.

He was just in time, for he knew by the time that had passed that the horseman must be near the rocks, and the actions of the two men showed that they were preparing to fire.

They had leveled their rifles on the rocks before them, and were very nearly ready to fire.

Texas Jack waited no longer, but called out sharply, in Spanish:

"Hands up there, both of you!"

One man, in the start he gave, pulled trigger, and both turned in terror to face the danger behind them.

Then they saw the Texan advancing toward them, rifle in hand, and they at once threw their weapons to their shoulders and pulled trigger.

Then followed half a dozen shots rapidly fired, but when it ceased, the Texan was still advancing, while the two men were down.

At that moment the horseman dashed into sight and drew rein at what he beheld, his revolver drawn.

"Ho, senor, there has been hot work here," he cried, seeing one of the men lying dead and the other writhing in agony, while Texas Jack still advanced some twenty paces away.

"Yes, Don Fuentes, it was hot work, for bullets flew dangerously near my ears; but I trust you were not hurt by the one shot fired at you?"

"No; the bullet struck the ground."

"It looks to me as though there was an ambush here, and for me."

"There was, senor."

"I was on my way to Buena Vista Hacienda, saw a party of horsemen I wished to avoid, and, reaching the timber yonder, beheld those horses."

"My glass revealed the riders and also that you were their game."

"I came by way of the water-wash, where my horse now is, and arrived just in time to prevent their firing, so called to them to up with their hands."

"One fired at you, and then they turned on me."

"Perhaps you know them, and understand their motive for wishing to get rid of you."

The Ranchero King rode up to the men and dismounted without uttering a word.

He turned the dead man over with his foot, then walked to the wounded man and gazed into his face as he was writhing in agony.

"Yes; I know them both."

"They are my men, and sought to kill and rob me, as they knew I was to go to the village to-day with a large sum of money."

"You have saved my life and my gold, senor, and I offer you my deepest gratitude and friendship, and that means a great deal for Don Marlo Fuentes to say, as you may some day discover."

Texas Jack warmly grasped the hand of the Ranchero King, and said:

"I certainly am glad to have served you, senor; but can we not do something for this wounded man, for he is suffering terribly."

"Yes, put him out of his misery," was the cool reply of the Ranchero King, as he drew his revolver and sent a bullet through the dying man's brain.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MYSTERIOUS BADGE.

JUST as Texas Jack had decided, remembering Mexique Soto's words about the Ranchero King, to bury his prejudice, and had grasped his hand in friendship, the strange man had deliberately fired a bullet through the brain of the dying wretch.

The Texan was inexpressibly shocked at the act, and hot words sprung to his lips, but before he could give vent to his feelings the Ranchero King said, coolly:

"There, that ends his sufferings, and it is more merciful than to allow him to linger hours in agony, for the wounds you gave him, two, I see, were both mortal."

"I dislike to see a man suffer when I can heal his pain."

This cold-blooded argument, that he had been merciful rather than cruel, in his own mind, completely amazed Texas Jack, and he could not utter a word.

So the Ranchero King continued:

"Now, senor, I am going on with my gold to the village, and will send a party out to bury those bodies."

"Will you accompany me, and then go to my hacienda as my guest?"

"I thank you, senor, but I am in a hurry to be on my way, having an important engagement at the Buena Vista Hacienda at noon, and I must ride hard to meet it."

"I will not detain you, then, and if your horse is fagged take mine."

"Thanks, senor, but mine will carry me along fast enough."

"I will go and fetch him."

"You will tell me how I can prove my appreciation of your kindness?"

"In no way whatever, senor."

"If you visit Mexico often, and I have reason to believe that you do, wear this little badge, and it may help you out of trouble, for it has a special charm in that way."

"I will pin it upon your breast, and if you can spare me a few days at any time at Hacienda del Monte, I shall be most glad to welcome you."

"Thanks, senor, if I pass near your Mountain Hacienda, as I have heard it called, I shall be glad to call; but why give me this beautiful badge?" and Texas Jack gazed at the badge with surprise and admiration, for it was a miniature sword of gold, the blade on both sides set with rubies, the hilt with diamonds.

It was swung to a pin, representing a tiny belt of gold, and upon which was a miniature buckle of the Mexican flag, formed of precious stones, and upon the band was engraved:

"HACIENDA DEL MONTE."

"I give it to you, senor, as I said, as a charm, a pledge, for worn by you, any one of the people of Marlo Fuentes will be your friend."

"Wear it, please, and some day test its virtue."

"I will wear it as you request, but it is so valuable that it looks like accepting a reward for saving your life."

"Do not so regard it, for the gift is not so intended, but given as a pledge of friendship."

"But you are in a hurry to be on your

way, so *adios*, senor, and good fortune be yours."

The Ranchero King raised his sombrero in his courteous way and rode on, while Texas Jack hastened after his horse, and was soon flying along toward the Buena Vista Hacienda, wondering over his strange meeting with the mysterious man.

"He said he would send out and bury those bodies, and I hope that he will," mused Texas Jack.

"But what an idea of mercy he has to kill a man to put him out of his misery."

"Texas Jack urged his horse hard, and arrived at the hacienda about on time."

A tempting dinner was ready for him, and with Major Sandos and Captain Verona he sat down to it.

The anticipated duel did not appear to take the major's appetite away, for he ate heartily, and when they were ready to start, said:

"Senor Omohundro, I have a letter for you, which explains itself, for it has one inclosed, should I fall."

"You will find it in my inner pocket, and one for you, Verona, will be with it."

"Now let us be off."

The horses were brought around, the Tonk-away was already in the saddle, and looked as though he had been "well fed and groomed," as Jack put it, so they mounted and rode away, an orderly following, for the ambulance ordered, with a sergeant and eight men as an escort, had started some time before.

The major's keen eye had noticed the badge Texas Jack wore, and he explained the meeting and adventure on the trail.

"Don Fuentes is more and more a mystery to me, senor, and I am glad that you saved his life."

"But that badge has been a talisman in the Fuentes family for many generations, and is said to bear some infallible charm, so you are fortunate in its possession."

"You are, indeed, for I too have heard of the charm of the Fuentes, and the Don certainly bears a charmed life, and he always wears one," Captain Verona remarked, just as they drew rein at the ford, where the ambulance and escort were waiting.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CAPTAIN CORSALA AND HIS FRIENDS.

CAPTAIN JUAN CORSALA left the quarters of his commander in no enviable frame of mind.

He had been forced into receiving a direct insult, and to challenge Major Sandos to wipe out the stain.

He knew that his treachery was fully understood, and, reviewing it from his dishonorable standpoint, he could not understand why his commander had not denounced him, and had him driven from the army, rather than risk his life in a duel with him.

That the major did protect him from dishonor, on account of his parents and sister, he could not comprehend, so foreign from his nature was such an act of kindness.

His attempt to bring Estelle Elwood into the quarrel, as though the major was jealous of him, had signally failed.

Captain Corsala did not like it that Texas Jack was brought into the case, and yet he infinitely preferred his knowing the secret to any of his brother officers.

"I shall kill him, and that will end it."

"I will then be major of the regiment with every chance of soon being the colonel, and as I will fall heir to his title, I will also inherit his love affair with that beautiful American girl, and make her my wife."

"I have lived too fast of late years, and my estate is hampered with debt; but she is very rich, I learn, and her money will set me all right."

"Yes, I must kill Sandos, that is certain, and the secret he holds against me will die with him, for I shall see to it that the Texan does not long survive him."

"Now, who shall I get for my second?"

"There is Don Rebello, the captain next in rank to me, and he has been out several times and is posted on duels—ah! I have it!"

"I will ask the Ranchero King!"

With this he drew rein, lighted a match, looked at his watch and saw that it was nearly eleven o'clock.

"I learn that Don Marlo Fuentes keeps late hours. The hacienda where he is spend-

ing a few days is just ten miles from my quarters, so I will go there.

"It is lucky that he is not at his mountain hacienda, or I could not reach him in time.

"I will just leave word at my quarters for Rebello to await up until I return, and then, with an escort of two men, go to the Ranchero King's lower ranch and find him."

He put spurs to his horse, halted ten minutes at his quarters, to leave word for Don Rebello and order two soldiers to accompany him, and then he set out with full speed for one of the ranches of Don Marlo Fuentes, where he had heard that the Ranchero King was then stopping for a few days.

His men wondered at his rapid riding, but kept well up, and after an hour and a half the lights of the hacienda came in view.

It was an adobe structure walled in, and the living part was comfortable, for the Don had fitted up one wing for his accommodation when he was visiting the lowland ranches he owned.

The Don was still up, and reading, the servant said, and Captain Corsala was soon ushered into his presence.

The Ranchero King looked surprised, for in his life of a recluse he very seldom had a visitor; but he knew Captain Corsala, had known him in the army, and once the officer had served him in an affair in which he had killed his man.

Under such circumstances Corsala did not feel that he was transgressing in asking a return of the compliment.

"Be seated, Captain Corsala," and the Ranchero King ordered wine and refreshments brought.

"You keep late hours, Don Marlo."

"Yes, I read until midnight, often later; but I am a fairly early riser, and little sleep satisfies me.

"May I ask why you are abroad so late?"

"To see you, Don Marlo, for I am in trouble."

"Living too fast, eh, and have gotten cramped?"

"Well, I can always help one out who has befriended me."

"Thank you, Don, but it is not gold that I want, but your friendly services in an affair of honor."

"I cannot refuse you a favor you once rendered me, Captain Corsala."

"I thank you, and I felt that you would be so good."

"Have you another second?"

"Yes, Captain Rebello, though I have not yet spoken to him about it.

"He is a good fellow and seconded me when I killed Romano."

"Ay, I heard of that affair."

"I have met Rebello also, and in fact have been anxious to meet him again, and this will give me the opportunity."

"You will like him I know, for he is a gallant fellow, and has been out several times himself."

"Yes, I know his record well, and his father's and grandfather's also.

"We will serve you together; but when, where, and with whom do you fight?"

"Major Sandos."

"Ah! I have met him but once.

"He is one of the brightest officers in our service, and is your superior officer."

"He waives rank in this meeting."

"He is anxious to fight, then; but, cannot it be arranged without a deadly encounter?"

"Never!" was the emphatic response.

"Then it must be arranged," coolly replied the Ranchero King.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE PRELIMINARIES.

"Yes; it must be arranged, for it is the death of Sandos at my hands, or I fall by his."

"As you please.

"But when and where?"

"To-morrow afternoon some time, and I believe somewhere on the river near Deadman's Ford."

"A long distance to go to kill a man."

"It is the wish of Sandos."

"Then you challenged?"

"Yes, senor."

"I have to go to the village to-morrow, but I will start early and get back early in the afternoon in fact will ride directly to

your quarters on my way back and join you."

"Thanks, senor, we will await you, and I will have Rebello see Captain Verona, who is the major's friend, and arrange all of the preliminaries."

"Do so."

"From what I have heard of you, you do not care what weapons are to be used?"

"No, anything will suit me."

"Now will you accept a bed for the night?"

"No, thank you, I must return, for Rebello is waiting up for me."

"Do not sit up later than necessary, sleep late in the morning, and take no exercise, so that your nerves will be steady, for of course I must wish for your success, though I would regret to see that dashing and handsome major fall."

Soon after Captain Corsala took his leave and rode rapidly back to his quarters.

Captain Rebello was awaiting him, entertaining himself in Corsala's rooms with his liquors and cigars.

He was a brusque officer, a thorough martinet, very unpopular, and a man who added to his income by gambling.

He was Captain Corsala's best friend, and the two had many kindred vices, so were born pals.

"What is it, Corsala, for you see I am still awake," he said, as he saw the host enter.

"Yes, and I hope not drunk."

"Oh, no, for the decanter has not been refilled, and still has a glass or two in it."

"But is there any trouble?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"You are to be my second."

"Good!"

"I like an affair where the ruby flows."

"This is to be to the death."

"Ah! a woman, of course?"

"No."

"What, then?"

"That is none of your business."

"Thanks."

"It is a quarrel between myself and one who, because I would not make a fool of myself to go with him to the rescue of a girl, and an American at that, called me a coward."

"Ah! that smacks of Sandos."

"It is with Sandos."

"Too bad."

"Why?"

"He'll kill you."

"I do not fear him."

"Oh, no, you are no coward, Corsala."

"But I am sorry for this, for he is too much of a Government pet for you to do other than harm yourself by this duel."

"I shall kill him."

"That means that you will go up a peg in rank."

"I do not care for that."

"What were you fool enough to accept his challenge for, then, if you are not to be benefited?"

"I challenged him."

"Then you are a fool."

"Thanks."

"But I'll go with you, as you know, only I wish it was some one in another regiment you were to meet, but you know best, and I hear he rapped you hard to-night about those prisoners you picked up."

"Well, I shall rap him hard now."

"When is it?"

"To-morrow, or rather to-day."

"But you are to find out."

"I will go over as soon as I have had a few hours' rest and breakfast."

"What weapons would suit you best?"

"I have no preference."

"That is the way to talk, and he is about your way of thinking."

"I only wish that it was not Sandos."

"Why, you are trying to convince me that he will kill me."

"Oh no, only I don't like fighting in the regiment; but if you kill him I go up a peg, you know."

"And you'll have me to thank."

"Yes, and if the Government relieves you, I step into the majority; but have you another second?"

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

"Who do you think?"

"I am not sure, but I guess."

"The Ranchero King."

Captain Rebello was on his feet in an instant and said:

"That man!"

"What have you against him?"

"It is the other way."

"How so?"

"Well, you have heard of the duels he has fought to avenge his grandfather and father?"

"Yes."

"I am one of the descendants of those who sent his grandfather into exile, and kept his father there also, but he seems to have forgotten to put me down on his list."

"He spoke most pleasantly of you, and said he would be glad to serve with you."

"All right, maybe he has forgotten, but my old grandmother jogs my memory constantly as to the part my ancestors played in prosecuting and persecuting General Fuentes, the exile; but I will see the major's second for you in the morning and arrange all. *Buenos noches, senor,*" and Captain Rebello went to his quarters.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ON THE FIELD.

WHEN Major Sandos arrived at the ford with Texas Jack and Captain Verona, he said to the sergeant in charge of the escort of the ambulance:

"We are going to the other side, sergeant, so look out for signals."

"When signaled, come across with the ambulance, and watch the crossing of Senor Texas Jack now, for he will show you the best way over."

"Yes, senor."

"Has any one else arrived here since you came?"

"No, senor."

"There is no fresh trail, senor, so they have not yet come," said Texas Jack, and he added:

"We can see from the bluffs on the other shore."

The three then rode into the river, two of the soldiers accompanying them and carrying the box of dueling pistols and swords belonging to Major Sandos.

Texas Jack led the way, the Tonkaway following, and then the major and Captain Verona, the two soldiers bringing up the rear.

The Texan was a perfect guide, and conducted the party through the dangerous ford in safety, and on up to the camp above, where, on a cliff, stood Boss awaiting them, he having returned to the camp after delivering his letter to Colonel Elwood.

He handed Texas Jack a letter, saluted the two officers politely, greeted the Tonkaway, and asked:

"Will all be to supper, Mars' Jack?"

"I hope all of our party will, Boss; but have you seen any one coming across the river, as I saw you watching from the bluff with your glass?"

"Yes, sir; there is a party of horsemen coming yonder."

Texas Jack wheeled in his saddle, and after a glance through his glass said:

"They are coming, Major Sandos, four in number, and if I am not mistaken, I recognize as one of them the Ranchero King."

"Doubtless, for Corsala once seconded him in a duel."

And the major threw himself down upon his *serape* to rest, Captain Verona following his example.

Texas Jack opened the letter from the colonel and read it.

It thanked him for the information regarding the intended movement of the Indians, said he would have his whole command ready for marching orders, to throw them to any point as soon as he heard from him, and he would also hold a force in readiness for the Mexican raiders should he report them as coming across the river.

He also told the Texan that a very valuable wagon train and stores would soon be due at the fort, and that a paymaster was coming with it having along considerable money, and if he, Texas Jack, deemed it best, he could send a courier to halt the train until the anticipated trouble with the Indians and the Mexican raiders was over.

"As soon as this affair is over I will have time to see to the train, the red-skins and the Robber Rangers," muttered Texas Jack.

"The Corsala party are now at the ford, and half-an-hour will tell what the result will be; but, if he kills Major Sandos, then he has me to deal with."

The party of Captain Corsala had halted for a few words with the sergeant, then ridden into the river, crossed in safety and come on up the trail to the bluff.

The scene for the duel had been selected by Texas Jack, and was in the little valley just where he had made his camp a few days before, and where Boss was busy preparing supper.

"From the looks of things somebody won't be here to supper to-night, Tonkaway, and I hope it won't be the major," said Boss.

"No, him good man, heap good."

"Treat Tonkaway like great chief, have plenty eat, big sleep, good man."

"You bet he is; but they are fixing for the fight."

"Yes, me see big fight."

"Major heap brave man."

"Don't like bad captain."

The other party had halted now, two of them being soldiers carrying the weapons.

Their horses were led aside, and Captain Corsala saluted his superior and bowed to Captain Verona and Texas Jack.

Captain Rebello also saluted his commander, nodded to Senor Verona, and said in his bluff way:

"I have not the honor of your American friend's acquaintance, Verona."

The Senor Verona in introducing them, gave Texas Jack the title he held as captain of the Ranch Rangers, and added:

"You have heard of him, Rebello, as Texas Jack."

"Well, yes, as a Texas desperado, was it not; but you have a right to select your own friends, of course, Verona."

The latter was about to make a sharp retort, when the Ranchero King stepped forward and grasped the hand of the Texan, and said:

"Senor Captain Rebello, this gentleman is my friend, as well as the friend of Major Sandos and Captain Verona, and I have yet to hear one word said against him, in fact it should not be uttered in my presence without rebuke."

"Pardon, senors, I guess I have mixed up the Senor Texas Jack with some one else," hastily said Captain Rebello, while, with a laugh the Texan replied:

"Doubtless, senor, for I have been terribly mixed up in my life with bad men from necessity; but it is not necessary in this affair for me to know you, as I shall deal with Don Fuentes."

Captain Rebello bit his lip and bowed, and the Ranchero King remarked:

"Yes, matters can be quickly arranged, now we are on the field."

CHAPTER XXXV.

A FEUD TO THE DEATH.

CAPTAIN CORSALA could not hide his determined intention to kill his adversary, and his belief that he would do so.

He was not nervous, yet it could be seen that he suppressed with great effort his emotion, and a desire to have the affair quickly over with.

Not a shadow was upon the handsome face of Major Sandos, and no one could have told that he was one of the two most deeply interested in the affair.

He had welcomed the Ranchero pleasantly and returned the salutes of Captain Corsala and Rebello.

His face wore a determined look, rather one of sorrow than anger, and he stood on the bluff with his arms folded, watching with seeming interest the sun near the horizon in his own loved land.

Captain Verona had left the management on the field to Texas Jack, and Senor Rebello had yielded to the Ranchero King, so that the two stepped apart and conferred together for a few minutes and then the dueling-pistols, graceful, but deadly-looking instruments, were gotten out, loaded, and the two principals called to their positions ten paces apart.

Texas Jack won the place and word to fire, and the Ranchero King said with a smile:

"The badge already shows its charm, senor, by giving you luck."

"Pardon me if I say that I trust it will give luck to my friend."

The Ranchero King smiled in a way that showed that the death of Corsala would not be a very cruel blow to him.

Then Major Sandos and Captain Corsala were placed in position, their weapons given them, and Texas Jack said, so that both should hear:

"I am to give the word to fire."

"The count will be one, two, three—fire!"

"The one who fires before the word fire, places himself at the mercy of the seconds of his adversary."

Then he called out in clearest tones:

"Senors, are you ready?"

"One, two, three—fire!"

One pistol only flashed, and it was fired by Corsala.

At the shot Major Sandos stepped backward a pace, and beckoned to Texas Jack, and said:

"Say, please, to Captain Corsala, that I did not fire on him, as I ran the gantlet of his shot to give him a chance for his life—upon conditions."

"The conditions, senor?"

"That he resigns from the army and leaves Mexico."

Corsala had cursed his luck when he found that he had not killed his foe, and as Texas Jack stepped toward him he said, hotly:

"I demand another fire."

"You have no right to demand a second shot from one who was merciful, and did not fire upon you; but I have a word from Major Sandos to you."

"Out with it, then."

"He did not wish your life on his hands, so did not fire, and demands that you resign from the army and exile yourself from Mexico."

"I will not do it, and I demand another fire."

"Pardon me, but the terms of this meeting still give Major Sandos his fire at you."

"That is the position, senor," called out the Ranchero King.

Captain Corsala's face grew livid, and he bit his lips savagely, and then said:

"I decline any conditions offered by Major Sandos, and as he has not fired upon me his shot should be forfeited, and a meeting with swords be granted."

"Such are not the terms, Senor Corsala," said the Ranchero King.

"And I decline to allow my principal to run the risk of another meeting with Captain Corsala," said Texas Jack.

"As I do," Captain Verona said.

"Pardon, senors, but as Captain Corsala's first second, I would refuse to allow him an advantage of Major Sandos," the Ranchero King said in his gentle, courteous way.

"And why not, if Major Sandos threw away his fire?"

"Corsala asks only that which is right," bluntly called out Captain Rebello.

Before Captain Verona or Texas Jack could reply, the Ranchero King spoke up:

"By the low standard at which Captain Rebello views honorable action among gentlemen, he is right from the desperado point of argument; but, as Captain Corsala has given me the prerogative in this affair, I distinctly assert that he shall be led into no act of dishonor through the intentional crime of one of his seconds."

Texas Jack gave a whistle at this turn in the affairs. Captain Verona looked surprised. Corsala grew uneasy, and Rebello's face grew livid as he cried:

"It seems that this affair must be but the forerunner of another."

"I so intended, senor," was the smiling reply of the Ranchero King, while, stepping quickly forward, Major Sandos said, sternly:

"This must be a feud to the death, and I will grant Captain Corsala another meeting, but with swords."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WITHOUT MERCY.

THE moment that Major Sandos had spoken, the matter was settled, and the eyes of Juan Corsala flashed with demon-like delight.

He could not understand just why Major Sandos had not fired upon him, but now that he had another chance, and with swords, he believed the game was as won, for he had

never yet met his superior with a blade, and though he had never crossed with his commander, still he deemed himself his master.

To the words of the major the seconds bowed assent, and Texas Jack said:

"You are kind, senor, to allow him a second meeting."

"I came here to kill him, and yet when I saw the faces of his dear old parents and beautiful sister that would haunt me, I relented and determined to give him a chance."

"See yonder little bird on that bush—this pistol must be emptied and I wish to take off its head."

Up went the dueling-pistol, there was a quick aim, a report, and the bird fell headless to the ground.

It showed the deadly aim of the man who had refused to fire upon Corsala, and all present felt that he had indeed spared his adversary.

No one seemed to arrive at this conclusion quicker than did Captain Corsala, and Rebello said with a sneer:

"He did spare you, Corsala, so look out that he be not your master with the sword as well."

"And you have a care of the Ranchero King, for he intends to kill you, Rebello."

The fling was felt by Rebello, and he turned away, as the Ranchero King approached with Corsala's sword.

As Texas Jack placed the rapier in the hand of Major Sandos he said:

"Do not let him kill you, senor, for it is his firm intention to do so."

"Yes, I have done my duty by him and now I am without mercy," was the low response.

The two men faced each other and the combat was begun.

Each measured the other's strength at the crossing of the blades, and then their skill and endurance.

Their play was beautiful, both being indeed masters; and all saw that this time it was a duel to the death.

"Now, Sandos, we meet for the last time on earth," hissed Corsala, but it caught the ears of the seconds and even the soldiers, the Tonkaway and Boss who stood apart, as did also the low reply:

"Yes, this time I show no mercy."

The Ranchero King appeared to be delighted with the grand spectacle and, after watching the fight for a minute, Texas Jack smiled in a way that showed that he felt no fear for the major.

Two minutes passed, and Corsala's hot work caused him to show a desire for a lull for breath.

But Major Sandos pressed him more hotly and he began to give ground.

Step by step he was forced back until he had the bluff behind him, and his seconds gave a warning cry.

But just then his guard was broken down and the sharp blade of Major Sandos was driven into his body to the very hilt, held there a second, and then, with a wonderful exhibition of strength, he drew his foe toward him and thus prevented his falling over the bluff.

A gasp that ended with a curse, and Juan Corsala was a dead man.

Major Sandos coolly tossed the weapon to one of the soldiers, and said pleasantly:

"Senors, I thank you for your kindness."

He walked away apart from the others and again stood on the bluff with folded arms, watching the setting sun.

A moment of silence followed Corsala's death, and, kneeling by his side, the Ranchero King placed his hand upon his pulse.

"Dead," he said, coolly.

Then he arose and faced Captain Rebello expectantly.

The latter started, flushed, and said bluntly:

"I suppose you demand a meeting now?"

"It was I who gave the insult, senor," was the smiling reply.

"Yes, you have long intended me for your prey, as my ancestors were the ones who brought ruin upon those of your name."

"Your insult was but to make me the challenger, and I demand satisfaction for your words here upon this field, if I can impose upon Captain Verona to act for me."

"Certainly, Rebello, if a meeting must be had."

"There is no time like the present, senor, for settling old scores and I will ask Captain Omohundro to be my friend in this, as he has on a former occasion."

"With pleasure, Don Fuentes, I'll act for you," was Texas Jack's reply, as he had taken a great dislike to Captain Rebello, and decided in his own mind that if a duel was to be fought between him and the Ranchero King, there was no need of delaying it.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE LAST ON THE LIST.

It was decided that the weapons were to be pistols, and not until the shots rung out did Major Sandos realize that another deadly duel was being fought within a score of paces of him, so wrapt up was he in his own thoughts.

He had not seen Texas Jack and Captain Verona load the weapons, place the principals, Rebello dogged, determined and fierce, the Ranchero King with his face unruffled, save for a wicked glitter in his magnificent eyes.

Texas Jack had won the word as before and the pistols flashed almost together.

But that "almost" was in favor of the Ranchero King, and his bullet cut through the heart of his foe in time to destroy his aim and cause his weapon to drop as his finger pulled the trigger.

Captain Verona sprung to the side of his brother officer, but the Ranchero King said quietly:

"He is dead, senor."

Then only was Major Sandos brought to a realizing sense of his surroundings and that another tragedy had occurred.

The sun was almost upon the horizon, as, turning quickly at the shots, he beheld Captain Rebello lying prone upon the ground and heard the Ranchero King's words, followed by:

"This is a splendid weapon, Senor Texas Jack."

"What has happened, senors?" cried Major Sandos, coming quickly toward the group.

"Permit me to explain, senor, by telling you that duty to those in their graves, my kindred, made me their avenger."

"That dead body, once known as Captain Rebello, was the last one on my list as the descendant of those who so cruelly wronged my ancestors."

"With his death my duty ends."

"He came here as one of Captain Corsala's seconds, and he dared to make the proposition to me to allow him to be first, that he might load the dueling-pistols."

"They were your weapons, Senor Sandos, and perfect matches, and it was his intention to change them after Senor Texas Jack had loaded your weapon, he placing no bullet in the other one."

"You heard my words to him when a second meeting was demanded, and they forced him to challenge me."

"Had it not come to-day, it would sooner or later, and now it is over with."

Major Sandos seemed deeply moved by what he heard, and said in a low tone:

"He is better dead, than live as an officer in a regiment of honorable men."

"Yes, he deserved his fate," Captain Verona said, earnestly.

"He deserved it, in that he was dishonorable and cowardly; but I killed him to cancel a debt of long standing."

Major Sandos gave an order to one of the soldiers to signal the sergeant to come over with the ambulance, and then stepping up to Texas Jack, he said in a low tone:

"I will not have to trouble you to deliver that letter, senor, but see what a close call I had."

He took from an inner pocket, just over his heart, a small miniature, set in a solid gold back.

In the center of the miniature the bullet of Juan Corsala had struck, shattering it, and bending the gold case over it, holding it there.

"It gave me a bruise, but that is of little moment, but the miniature saved my life, but was shattered to atoms."

"A close call, indeed, senor," and Texas Jack admired the nerve of the man who had under such circumstances, offered his enemy

a chance for his life, and could understand how merciless he would be when again forced to risk his life against one whom he knew to be such a villain as Corsala had been proven.

As Boss had prepared a good supper, Texas Jack invited the Ranchero King and the two officers to join him, an invitation that was accepted, the bodies having been placed in the ambulance and dispatched across the river.

Then the sergeant's men had prepared supper, after which they departed for the quarters of Captain Corsala with their ghastly load.

Soon after supper in the Texan's camp the Ranchero King said that he must return to his ranch, and Major Sandos and Captain Verona expressed their intention of accompanying him as far as their trails led together.

Texas Jack guided them across the ford in the darkness, though the Ranchero King seemed to know just how to cross, and then bidding them farewell returned to his camp.

The Tonkaway and the negro sat together discussing the deadly duels they had witnessed, and the Texan joined them with the remark:

"Well, it is over, and I am mighty glad Major Sandos was not killed."

"Had he not killed Corsala his life would not have been worth a peso."

"Other captain heap bad man too," said the Tonkaway.

"You are right, Tonk, Captain Rebello was also a black sheep in the flock, and the major is fortunate to get rid of two such officers in his regiment."

"The Ranchero King is a dandy, Mars' Jack."

"Yes, Boss, he is a marvel to me."

"He is a man really with a graveyard and kills a man with as sweet a smile on his face as though he was doing him a favor."

"He's as dangerous as death, and as mysterious."

"But we'll hunt our blankets now, for I go early to the fort in the morning, and, Tonk, I wish you to make another run up into the Indian country, while Boss lies in wait here at the ford, for there are movements on foot all around that we must keep our eyes upon," and twenty minutes after the three were fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TEXAN'S TIDINGS.

COLONEL ELWOOD knew well the value of Texas Jack's information, and upon receiving his letter by Boss he at once acted and promptly, though not in a way to attract attention that would alarm the non-combatants at the fort.

Major Gorman and the other ranking officers at the fort were called into consultation, the Texan's letter placed before them and the matter discussed.

The universal verdict was to have the cavalry prepared for moving at a moment's notice, the infantry and artillery to be on the alert, the cattle and horses pastured nearer the fort, and the scouts to be kept off on the lookout for any suspicious signs.

Boss had been questioned closely as regarded his master's movements and about when he would be expected to return from Mexico, and he had answered to the best of his knowledge.

It was therefore an agreeable surprise the third day after receiving Texas Jack's letter to see him ride into the fort.

He at once went to headquarters, and found Estelle with her father.

"Sit down, Omohundro, and let me congratulate you upon getting safely out of Mexico, for I felt considerable anxiety about your going there, as I know you are not popular across the Rio Grande."

"No, sir; I fear I shall be less so hereafter."

"Tell us about it, for I make an exception with my daughter, and tell her just how matters are."

"In fact, she is a very valuable *aide-de-camp* to me."

"Yes; I shall be glad to hear your story, Mr. Omohundro," said Estelle, in her sweet way.

"Well, colonel, I went across the river for two reasons; first, because I had a mission to perform for Major Sandos, and next, to see my old pard of Confederate days, Soto."

"I did not go straight to my ranch when I left here, but to the river at Deadman's Ford, for I had an arrangement with Major Sandos to meet a man there."

"With Sandos, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see Major Sandos?" asked Estelle quietly.

"Yes, Miss Elwood, I left him last night, or rather he left my camp on this side of the river."

"Indeed!"

"Why did he not come on to the fort?"

"He had company with him, sir, the Ranchero King and Captain Verona, his adjutant, but of that I will tell you later, for it will be at his request I make a statement in his behalf."

"I hope he is in no trouble," and as her father made the remark Estelle wore a worried look.

"Not now, sir; the trouble is over."

"Well, tell it all in good time, Texas Jack."

"You were speaking of meeting some one on the river after leaving here?"

"Yes, it was the man who drove the ambulance, the day the major left here for Mexico."

"His name was Pablo, and you remember that there was a runaway?"

"Yes, and the major had a narrow escape from death, by some cowboy killing the horses ere they reached a precipice."

"I was the one who did it, sir, and Captain Corsala was along that day."

"I recognized the driver as an old offender in Texas, and I felt sure, from what I saw, that Major Sandos had been the victim of foul play."

"I so told him, and the result was a plan to get the man Pablo into my clutches and force from him the truth."

"So the major sent him with a bogus letter to you, sir, I lassoed him and got from him a confession of his guilt and who it was that had bribed him to take the major's life."

"If I was a gambler I would stake my last dollar that it was Captain Corsala," said Estelle with some show of excitement.

"You would win, Miss Elwood," said Texas Jack, and then he went on with the story of Pablo's guilt, his confession, his release by him, and the attempt the man made to ambush and kill him.

He told all, even to punishing him by taking the belt of gold for Soto, and then of his visit to his ranch and going to the camp on the river where he was joined by the Tonkaway.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE VERDICT OF THE DUEL.

THAT half of the story was not told, when Texas Jack spoke of his return to the river camp, both Colonel Elwood and Estelle felt assured, and the latter said:

"Then Major Sandos knows of your discovery, Mr. Omohundro?"

"Yes, Miss Elwood, I went into Mexico, taking the Tonkaway with me, and I went to the Buena Vista Hacienda, Major Sandos's ranch home and headquarters."

"I was within sight of the hacienda when we ran upon Captain Corsala and an escort returning to their quarters and we were made prisoners."

In the same quiet, modest way, Texas Jack went on to tell how he had been threatened by Corsala, and he found most attentive listeners in the colonel and his daughter.

The coming of Major Sandos was made known, his return with him to his quarters, the tale of Corsala's guilt, and the prompt sending for that officer.

"This crime of Captain Corsala I am allowed to tell you, Colonel and Miss Elwood, but to others it must be a dead secret on account of the man's aged parents and lovely sister, for so Major Sandos demands."

They listened in silence to the scene in which the major forced Corsala to challenge him, and afterward to the Texan's tale of his ride to the village to see Soto, of his discovery of the ambush set for the Ranchero King upon his return, and what followed.

Both were shocked at hearing how the Ranchero King had put one of the intended assassins out of his misery, and when Jack

showed the charm given him they greatly admired it.

He spoke of Major Sandos's elegant home, of the start after dinner to the scene of the duel, the major's sending the ambulance on ahead, and the arrival there of both parties to the encounter, when it was discovered that Corsala's seconds were the Ranchero King and Captain Rebello, the latter one of the most disagreeable men in the lancers regiment.

All about the duel, ending in a double meeting, and resulting in a second one between Rebello and the Ranchero King, the Texan made known, the colonel and Estelle listening with breathless interest, and the latter saying with spirit:

"I do not blame Major Sandos, do you, father?"

"No, my daughter, I do not well see how he could do otherwise.

"The *duello* is allowed in the Mexican Army and Sandos was forced to expose the villainy of Corsala or fight him.

"In my mind he chose the wisest course, as he was determined to protect the man and his family from public dishonor; but, then, that Ranchero King, Texas Jack, bobs up serenely all the time it seems, whenever there is any killing to be done."

"It seems so, sir; but I am beginning to admire the man wonderfully, and I would rather have him for a friend than a foe.

"Still, I cannot get it out of my mind that he is more than he appears, that there is a deeper mystery still to solve about him, and some day I shall solve it, though he told me he was going now to return to Hacienda del Monte and live the life of a recluse."

"I must call upon him, however, to thank him for the services rendered Estelle and myself, and as soon as this Indian trouble is over, I shall do so, and I wish you to be my guide."

"With pleasure, sir."

"I sincerely hope that Major Sandos will get into no trouble with his Government on account of this duel."

"I think not, sir."

"And how fortunate that he was not struck," said Estelle.

"But he was struck, Miss Elwood, I forgot to tell you, and most miraculously saved, as the bullet of Captain Corsala aimed directly for his heart, struck a miniature he wore, incased in gold.

"The likeness was shattered, and the bullet doubled the gold case over it, but, save a bruise, the major was not hurt, though I saw him step back quickly at Corsala's fire and then I believed he had been hard hit.

"He, however, said nothing about being struck until afterward, when he showed me how close had been his escape."

"Did you recognize the likeness, Mr. Omohundro?"

"No, Miss Ellwood, it was shattered."

"And Major Sandos did not say whose likeness it was that had rendered him such good service?"

"Oh, no, he did not say."

Then Texas Jack went on to state what Soto had told him of an intended dash of the Ranger Robbers, to capture the wagon-train, and the spot where the attempt would be made.

He also said that he had sent the Tonkaway again on a scout into the Indian country, and added:

"Now, colonel, will you allow me to offer a suggestion, for I believe you will have the red-skins and the Mexican raiders to deal with at the same time, in fact, I believe the Robber Rangers have put the red-skins up to make this advance," said Texas Jack.

CHAPTER XL.

SETTING THE TRAPS.

COLONEL ELWOOD appreciated greatly any suggestion of Texas Jack, for he knew well that no one was better able to offer one than the Texan, who had been a gallant Confederate soldier for years, had served as cowboy, Indian-fighter, scout, guide and captain of the Rangers whose duty it was to protect the Texan border.

"Yes, indeed, Omohundro, I will be glad to hear all the suggestions you care to offer."

"Well, sir, my idea is that the Indians will strike the fort, coming here by the Range trail, and trying to surprise you, run-

ning off your horses, mules and cattle, and if it was a surprise, perhaps inflicting much damage upon you, for without horses you could not pursue them, and they would ambush you if you did."

"The best of reasoning, Omohundro."

"Now this attack, sir, would prevent your sending troops to guard the settlement, and they could return that way, doing untold damage and gaining their stronghold with booty and scalps galore."

"Very true, for they would run our horses and cattle to their stronghold from here, with a very small force of warriors."

"Yes, sir, and during their attack the Mexican Robber Rangers could attack successfully the train and get across the river with their booty."

"You seem to grasp the whole situation, Omohundro, and you wish me to be prepared for the Indians and the Robber Rangers as well."

"Just so, colonel."

"I have seven hundred fighting-men, all told."

"Well, colonel, your infantry and artillery can defend the fort, when prepared for a surprise, against twice the force of the Indians, your scouts can report their coming, your horses and cattle can be corralled in time, and, beaten off here, the red-skins will make a dash for the settlements."

"Beyond a doubt."

"But you have three hundred cavalry, that can destroy their trail in leaving the fort, so as not to let the Indians know they are gone."

"Yes."

"The cavalry can divide in three parts, one to watch the raiders so as to keep them from recrossing the river, and a troop will do this, a second troop can be hidden away in the wagons, to surprise the Mexicans, and the other four troops can lie in ambush for the Indians, stampede them and drive them on the run to their village, while, if you could spare a couple of six-pounders for this force, it would be of great benefit."

"I can and will spare them, Omohundro, and will still have six guns at the fort."

"You have planned like the skillful soldier you are, and I will follow your suggestions to the letter."

"You should have entered the army, Mr. Omohundro," said Estelle.

"You forget, Miss Elwood, that for over four years I fought the army I am now serving; but the Blue to me to-day is as dear as the Gray once was."

"Well said, Omohundro, and it is just such Southerners as you that make our best Americans."

"You fought us hard, lost your cause, which was as dear to you as our flag to us, laid down your arms and are to-day true citizens, ready to offer your lives for those who were your foes."

"No other country in the world could have been thus reunited," said the colonel, with enthusiasm.

"But when do you think the red skins may be expected?"

"The Tonkaway is off now on a scout, sir, as I said, and he will be able to tell within a couple of days of the time, if not nearer to it."

"I will send you word, sir, the moment he returns, and it would be well to start the cavalry very soon, covering up their trail by driving cattle over it."

"A good idea; but where shall the cavalry go?"

"I will guide the party to a hiding-place on the river, and to a good camp, sir."

"Then I will take the other party to meet the train, and afterward guide the third party to a spot to ambush the Indians."

"But can you do this?"

"I mean, colonel, by my doing the work, that the Tonkaway, Boss and myself can do it, and they are just as much to be depended upon as I am."

"Yes, I know you trust them implicitly."

"I have had reason to, sir, for they have been trusted, tried in the fire and never failed me."

"If I fell wounded, that Indian and that negro would not leave me but stand and die by my side, and I believe I would do the same by either of them."

"I am sure that you would, or by any man that needed your aid."

"But, colonel, there is another thing I wish to mention, sir."

"Yes?"

"I made known to Major Sandos the knowledge of this intended raid, and though he may not be able to check them, my friend Soto will post him when they have started and he will guard the fords so as to catch any of them who may escape your soldiers."

"It is good of him, and I only hope he may; but I wish them to come over just to get the reception we will give them, and also that if they escape, Sandos may catch them, and quick work he will make of them if they are caught in their guilt."

"He will, sir; but now I must return to my camp, sir, and you will know where to reach me by courier, if you need me, and where to send the cavalry for me to act as guide to their respective posts."

"Yes, but may not these red-skins pass your ranch in their coming here?"

"They may, sir, and doubtless will; but I must take my chances of that," was the plucky reply of the brave Texan, who knew that all he had in the world might be wiped out by one blow from the raiding red-skins.

But, without a care on his sunny face, Texas Jack soon after rode away from the fort to return to his lone camp on the river.

CHAPTER XLI.

AN UNLOOKED-FOR VISITOR.

TEXAS JACK returned to his camp to find that Boss had fitted it up as comfortably as possible, as though convinced of a stay of some days there.

He had built two wickiups, one for his chief the other for the Tonkaway and himself, had gathered wood in plenty and secured both game and fish, for he knew that Texas Jack liked his larder well supplied.

The Texan had brought a pack-horse along from his ranch with extra provisions and all that was needed, and a fifth horse in case of an accident.

He was a perfect judge of horseflesh, and had not a mean animal on his ranch, while the animals that he and his two companions depended upon for their use, were of the very best for speed and endurance.

"Well, Boss, you look as though you expected to ranch here for some time; but I wish you to go on a long and hard ride for me," said Texas Jack as he rode into camp upon his coming from the fort.

"All right, Mars' Jack, I'll be ready when you say."

"I have come to the conclusion that the Comanches will come down the trail by our ranch, and we must be prepared for them."

"Mine is the nearest to them, but then come Vernon's, Haney's, Scott's, Eyster's, and several others, all of which will be taken in in their sweep."

"That's so, sir."

"Now, I wish you to push for the ranch with all speed, give the boys there a warning, tell them to hide our outfit so as not to lose that, though the cattle they can do nothing with, no more than a few of the best horses they can take with them."

"Let Bolton remain at the ranch to see to this, and Lucas and Varney go the ranches nearest to warn them of danger, so that they can save their household effects and some of their stock at least, certain their lives."

"Yes, sir."

"When they have given the warning, the three had better get together and push for the Dismal Canyon, where the Indians will not go, and I will look them up there."

"I'll go like a bird, sir."

"All right; and come back on a fresh mount, and bring back my whalebone for me, and the Tonk's best horse also, for we may need them."

"I'll do it, sir; but you will stay here?"

"Yes, unless called away by some unforeseen circumstance I do not know of now."

In fifteen minutes Boss was mounted and away, and pushing hard for the ranch.

As he was to leave his horse there, he did not spare the animal, more than to foot it himself up and down the hills and keep a steady canter on level land.

Knowing every foot of the country, he was well posted just where he could cut off a mile or two, and when night came on it did not trouble him in the least, as both horse and rider were sure not to go wrong.

It was late in the afternoon when Boss set off, about four o'clock, and Texas Jack, having had dinner, was smoking his pipe and looking out from his comfortable seat on the bluff, when he espied a horseman on the other shore approaching the ford at a gallop.

He was at once all attention, and getting his glass leveled it upon the one he saw coming.

As he drew nearer, he muttered:

"He pushes the breeze as though he was a courier.

"But he is a Mexican, that is certain, for I saw the sun glint on his gold lace and buttons."

When the horseman drew nearer Texas Jack again leveled his glass, and after a minute's observation, sprung to his feet, saying:

"No, there is no mistaking that form and face as I see it now; yes, and I recognize his splendid black horse now.

"He is coming here for a purpose, and that can only be to visit the fort or find me.

"I will meet him at the ford."

With this, Texas Jack went at a swinging pace along the bluff until he came to the trail leading down to the river.

It was a rough one and winding, but he went rapidly along, and as he reached the river shore he saw the horseman nearly across the stream.

The latter caught sight of him as he advanced from the canyon through which the trail ran, and called out:

"Ho, Texas Jack, it is you, and I am indeed fortunate, for I came to see you."

"And I am glad to see you, Major Sandos, for I recognized you a mile back; but I hope nothing has gone wrong."

"Come up to your camp and I will tell you," was the Mexican officer's reply.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE MAJOR'S CONFESSION.

WHEN the two had arrived in camp, Texas Jack staked the major's horse out, then throwing another *serape* on the ground, by his own upon the bluff, said with a smile:

"The best hospitality I can offer you now, senor, until supper, and then I can give you a good meal, for the boys say I am a good cook."

The major responded:

"I could ask no better hospitality, Amigo Omechundo, and am content.

"I was fortunate in finding you, as I wish to have a talk with you, in fact ask your advice and seek a favor of you."

"I am more than willing, Major Sandos, to serve you," was Texas Jack's earnest response.

The major sat in silence, glancing over the vast landscape visible from the bluff.

It was just the spot he had walked to the evening before, where he had stood with folded arms after the duel, unconscious of all about him.

He had glanced at the red stain, still upon the ground, where Captain Corsala's life had ebbed out, and then had gone to the bluff.

At last he said:

"I returned to my hacienda with Verona last night, the Ranchero King leaving us when the trail branched off, and remarking that he was going still more than ever into a life of retirement.

"Whether Captain Corsala had sent a courier to his parents, with a notice of the duel, I do not know, but they had come to his quarters in the night and were there when his body was brought in by the *serape*."

"Word at once came to me, and I sent Verona over to tell the story of the affair, and then departed with his body for their home. Early this morning I received by courier messenger this letter."

He took from his pocket a letter addressed in a feminine hand, and which Jack read as follows:

"SENOR SANDOS:—

"Time was when we were the best of friends, and I believed that the same feeling existed between my brother and yourself.

"I thought I have learned through my parents, who have just arrived at our new domestic home, bringing his body, that he fell by your hand in a duel.

"From what Captain Verona said to my

parents, my brother was in the wrong, you in the right.

"But that is one side of the story, and his forever silenced lips cannot give his testimony against you.

"His second, Captain Rebello, who could also have spoken, was killed at the same time in a duel with one of your seconds.

"The affair of honor was not fought on Mexican soil, but across the river in Texas, for some strange reason.

"My brother and his second were brought back dead, while you, and your second, Captain Verona, returned alive and unhurt, and we have only Captain Verona's statement of the affair, for dead lips cannot contradict or accuse.

"I come of a revengeful race, and I dearly loved my brother.

"He was our idol, for our love for him overlooked many of his acts of life which others condemned.

"If he was wrong, I wish to know it upon your word and honor.

"If he was wronged, then shall I act, and I believe upon the rule of a life for a life.

"You are a man without fear, and yet I tell you to beware of a woman, when that woman is a loving sister, a brother's savior, and one who will be merciless in her hate.

"I expect no answer by courier, but you remember well the tree known as the Lover's Post-office, in the timber island on the prairie a mile from our home.

"Within twenty-four hours I will go there for a reply to this letter, and will look in the cavity of the tree where you and I have before left messages for each other.

"I shall go to-morrow night for your answer.

"If I do not find it there I shall believe you are guilty of my brother's murder, and then you shall suffer through my avenging hand.

"You know this is no idle threat, Miguel Sandos, for well do you know the nature of Juan Corsala's sister.

"JUANITA CORSALA."

"Well, Senor Jack, what do you think of that letter?"

"I would say that the woman would carry out her threat, sir."

"You are right, she will."

"Can I do anything to prevent it?"

"She demands my story of the duel.

"How can I tell it her?"

"She knows her brother's faults, and is aware of many of his deeds, which she says her love overlooked.

"To be frank with you, I greatly admired Senorita Corsala when she was but fifteen.

"There was no real love affair, remember, no pledge given her, only it was a case it seems of deep friendship and mutual regard.

"It was drifting into a nearer relationship when I met another.

"I will be confidential and tell you truthfully that the other was your beautiful countrywoman, Miss Elwood.

"She was so lovely in face and form, so noble in nature, so good to me, that as I lay wounded at the fort I learned to love her.

"I felt that I had been far wrong in thinking I could have loved Juanita Corsala, and so my attentions to her ceased.

"She is of a jealous nature, and her brother told her of Estelle Elwood, and he came to me and urged that I return to his sister, as she was one to do a desperate act in her mad jealousy, and strike at the life of Miss Elwood to hurt me.

"Now you know the truth, and it will be Miss Elwood she will strike not me."

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE TEXAN'S MISSION.

TEXAS JACK was startled at the words of Major Sandos, and said:

"Surely, senor, she could not do so vile a thing?"

"Yes, senor, she is a woman of strong impulses, and a jealous woman is without reason, mercy or discretion.

"As I said, no word of love ever passed my lips for Juanita Corsala; but I wrote her little poems, gave her trilling courtesies, and in a romantic way we were wont to meet in the timber island.

"When I met Miss Elwood, I went to see

Senorita Corsala and frankly told her that I had met one whom I hoped to make my wife, and I came to her as I would to a sister to tell her so.

"I shall never forget the expression of her face, though she congratulated me most warmly.

"But if ever a fiend looked through angel eyes upon me, it was in Juanita Corsala's look that she gave me when she asked the lady's name.

"I did not tell her, but her brother did, and he urged her on in her hatred of Miss Elwood.

"Now I feel that she will strike Miss Elwood to punish me."

"Heaven grant not."

"So I pray.

"But we must prevent it, and I look to you."

"Command me, senor."

"Of course I could write her nothing.

"I cannot go to visit her, to meet her there, as I am ordered to start to-night to Mexico City to report this double duel to the Government, for the inspector-general was on his rounds this morning and came to my hacienda.

"I told him all, but he ordered me at once to go to the city to report.

"I would not leave until I had seen you, or communicated with you, and so I came.

"I shall go directly from here to the hacienda, then continue on from there, and I will guide you as near that timber island as I can, if you will go there for me."

"Gladly."

"I will give you a letter to her, and you must explain all.

"To stop that enraged woman, the truth must be told as it is, for her brother's deeds must be known, at least to her.

"You can tell her that it was to protect her, her parents, and his name that I acted as I did, and, in fact, I leave all with you."

"I never could manage a woman I loved myself, senor, but for any one else I'm a dandy to talk to them, and don't scare worth a cent.

"I'll talk plain truth to her, and let her understand the whole affair, and that upon her good behavior depends the honor of her brother's name."

"It is pitiable to threaten a woman, but then her nature can only be subdued by fear of personal consequences; and she is as proud as a Lucifer, and I know that she has made many sacrifices to protect her brother's name from scandal.

"Then she idolizes her dear old dead parents, and to save them she can be reasoned with, and you are the one to do it."

"I will do my best, senor."

"And I have written you a pass, or authority for your coming to Mexico, being subject to orders from the Government as a second in my duel, and a witness, so you will have no trouble from arrest and annoyance."

"I shall be glad of that, senor, as I am now engaged in a most important work, which I will make known to you.

"The Tonkaway is now off on a scout, and I sent Boss, my colored pard, to my ranch, and to warn the other ranchmen in that neighborhood, though they are few and far between.

"The Tonkaway will not return, at the soonest, before to-morrow night, if then, and Boss will not be back sooner, so I can get back here within thirty-six hours, I hope."

"Readily, though you will be almost day and night in the saddle."

"I do not mind that, senor, for I am tough as a pine-knot, and am good for a week in the saddle and roughing it at any time.

"I will now get supper, while you write that letter, then I will outfit the camp outfit and the horses up the canyon where they will be safe, and go with you."

"You should reach the timber island, near the Corsala Hacienda, to-night by eleven, and it may be that she will come to night."

"Should she not, you can go on to the hacienda in the morning and see her, but it would be best to meet her at the old trying place, as no one would see the meeting."

"The family burying ground of the Corsalas is in the timber island, and not far from the post office I see she speaks of in her letter."

"She will not be afraid to go there at night?"

"Afraid? Juanita Corsala is a woman who knows no fear," was the emphatic response of Major Sandos.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE MIDNIGHT MEETING.

TEXAS JACK proved his claim to being a good cook, for he gave Major Sandos a most tempting supper.

He had told the Mexican officer of his visit to the fort, and that the verdict of both Colonel Elwood and Estelle was that he could not have done otherwise than force a duel with Corsala under the circumstances.

The major was much pleased with this verdict, and having secured the services of Texas Jack for his mission to meet Juanita Corsala, his spirits rose and he seemed really cheerful.

He saddled his own and the Texan's horse, while the latter broke up the camp, *cached* the outfit and took the pack animal and the extra horse to the canyon, where he could so stake them out they could reach water and grass.

It was just sunset as the two mounted and crossed the river, and they rode at a sweeping gallop all the way to the Buena Vista Ranch, for there horses could be changed.

It was just a three hours' ride to the hacienda, and the major found all in readiness for his continuing on to the city of Mexico.

They had a snack together, Texas Jack was given a fresh horse, a superb animal, the major begged him to accept as a present from him, and for several miles they rode on together.

As he was going into Mexico, and to visit a lady, the Texan had somewhat altered his attire, changing his rough costume for a rather stylish riding-suit, his belt-of-arms being concealed under his coat, and a silk *neglige* shirt replacing the woolen one he usually wore.

"There is your trail, senior, and you will pass two haciendas before reaching the Corsala home.

"It is the third, and on the right hand, just five miles from here.

"The moonlight will reveal to you, as you come in sight of it, a timber island just off the trail on your left, just where you come in sight of the hacienda lights.

"It is to that timber island you go, and you will find it a good camping place, with grass and water; should you have to remain, and the spirits of the dead Corsalas will not disturb you.

"The Post-office Tree is near the southern edge of the timber, and the moonlight should fall full upon it.

"In its trunk you will see the hollow which we called the Letter Box, and if Senorita Juanita comes to the timber island, you will find her there or in the little cemetery.

"You have the letter I gave you for her, and I leave all to you, and for Heaven's sake protect from her hatred that beautiful girl, Senorita Elwood.

"I have given orders to Captain Verona that you are at home in my hacienda, and he is to see to it that the fords are guarded to catch the returning Robber Rangers who escape you on the Texas side.

"I only wish we could prevent them from crossing, but that appears to be impossible yet awhile.

"I shall return from the City of Mexico the moment I can do so, and will see you as soon as possible afterward.

"Now *adios*, and good fortune attend you."

They warmly grasped hands and the major spurred on after his escort, while Texas Jack rode away on the trail leading to the spot where he was to meet a young and beautiful woman maddened with grief at her brother's death, and jealous rage against Estelle Elwood, who had won from her Miguel Sandos.

The Texan found no difficulty in following the well-marked trail.

In a mile a hacienda appeared on his right, and a dog barked at the sound of the falling of his horse's hoofs.

Soon after a second hacienda appeared on

his left, and from its windows floated out the sound of music, for some young folks were enjoying themselves beneath its roof.

A ride of a couple of miles further and a distant light came into view.

It was upon his right, and not far from him he saw a timber island, several acres in size.

He knew that the light shone in the Corsala hacienda, and that the clump of timber near at hand was the trysting place.

He turned off for the little *molte*, the moon at its full guiding his way.

He rode into the timber, glancing at his watch as he did so, halted at a spring, watered his horse and staked him out with the saddle on, the bridle hung upon the saddle-horn.

Then he walked on toward the southern edge of the timber, to suddenly come upon a burying-ground.

A new-made grave, the earth still damp, told him that Juan Corsala had been placed that day in his last resting-place, and he reverently raised his sombrero in the presence of the dead.

Then he strode on and soon came to the Post-office Tree.

It was just midnight, and as he halted by the tree he saw a horse and rider coming across the prairie toward the timber.

"It is the senorita," muttered Texas Jack, and with his gaze upon her he saw her dash up to the timber not far from where he stood, throw herself from her saddle, cast the rein over a limb and penetrate to the little burying-ground.

He beheld her throw herself at length with a bitter sob upon the newly-made grave and heard her cry out in her grief:

"My brother! were you indeed murdered, or did you bring your death justly upon your own head?"

The Texan would not break in upon her grief, but waited patiently until she rose and came quickly toward the trysting-tree.

Texas Jack stood in the shadow until the Mexican girl approached the tree and stretched out her hand to thrust it into the hollow; then he stepped forward and revealed himself.

CHAPTER XLV.

A WOMAN'S LOVE.

As the moonlight fell upon Juanita Corsala, it revealed a very beautiful woman.

She wore a small turban with feathers in it, and had slipped her long riding-skirt on over the house-dress she wore.

Her hair and eyes were black as night, her face pale, and her features perfect, while her form was tall, graceful and slender.

She started as she suddenly saw Texas Jack step into the moonlight, his rifle under one arm, his form erect, and the moonlight distinctly revealing his fine face.

"Pardon, senorita, but I was here, and, seeing you, supposed that you are the Senorita Juanita Corsala," he said in his low, pleasant manner, when he had raised his sombrero.

"I am the Senorita Corsala, senior, and I came here for a purpose. Are you sent hither by any one?"

"I am here by the request of a friend, and I bear a letter to you."

"I can read it in the moonlight."

And she read aloud:

"RESPECTED SENORITA—

"In response to your letter, I send my friend, Captain Omohundro, of the Texas Rangers, who will make any explanation to you that you may require.

"I am on my way to the City of Mexico, having been ordered there by the inspector-general, so it was impossible for me to meet you, and I cannot write that which Captain Omohundro can explain.

"With the sympathy and regard of a friend, I remain,

"Yours,

"MIGUEL SANDOS."

"Where is Senor Sandos now?"

"On his way to obey his orders, senorita."

"When did you see him?"

"To-day."

"Where?"

"At his hacienda."

"And he gave you this for me?"

"He did."

"When does he return?"

"He does not know when the Government will permit him to do so."

"Was he ordered there to answer for the killing of my brother?"

"Yes, and to explain the duel of Captain Rebello and Don Marlo Fuentes."

"You are an American?"

"Yes, senorita."

"A Texan?"

"Yes."

"We Mexicans hate Americans."

"As a nation, perhaps, but not individually, I hope."

"We have nothing to love them for."

"One is always entitled to their own opinions, senorita, so we will not quarrel on the score of you being a Mexican and I a Texan."

"Why did Major Sandos send you here?"

"To place aright your view of his unfortunate duel with your brother."

"Does he fear me?"

"Oh, no; he respects you, regards you as he would a sister, and does not wish you to feel, in spite of the barrier of a grave between you, that he is guilty, as your letter indicated your belief that he was."

"You read the letter?"

"I did."

"And you say I am wrong?"

"Wholly at fault."

"In what particular?"

"Every particular."

"You are bold, senior."

"I am truthful."

"Yet an American?"

"Yes, though one your people of the lower order call a hated Gringo."

"In what am I wrong, for my poor brother lies in his grave not twenty paces away?"

"True. I passed his grave awhile since, and in that he lies there you are right, but in all else you are wrong."

"He and his second, the Senor Rebello, were killed."

"Yes, on Texan soil."

"Why fight there?"

"To avoid trouble to the survivor, should the Government take cognizance of the duel."

"Ah! I believe there is a law in our land, of not considering a duel fought by Mexicans on foreign soil."

"Yes, senorita."

"But, the fact remains that my brother and his second went there and were both killed."

"Did not Captain Verona explain?"

"I allowed him to explain nothing when he came."

"I am here, then, for that purpose."

"Suppose I say that I will not hear you?"

"Then you are unjust, and prefer to treasure your belief in a wrong done, than be convinced of your error."

"You have a very bold way of speaking which I do not like."

"One never likes to be corrected, senorita; but I cannot believe that you are willing to nurse a wrong impression rather than know the truth."

"What palliation have you to offer?"

"None for myself, much for my friend, Major Sandos."

"He killed my brother."

"Yes, and your brother was the challenger."

"Ah! is that so?"

"It is."

"But he was insulted by Sandos."

"Granted, and purposely."

"Well, my love for my brother prompts me to avenge him, and I will do so. I will make Sandos feel."

"Yes, you will add to your brother's sin by doing a cruel wrong yourself," was the Texan's cool response to this.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A SHARP ENCOUNTER.

THE maiden's eyes flashed at the words of Texas Jack, and she said, almost indignantly:

"Do you dare accuse my brother, lying yonder in his grave, of sin and sin of upholding him in it?"

"Say nothing of the dead, senorita; he is a good man in all things, and he is not trying out this inhuman law I have seen

marble monuments lie like pirates of the virtues of the dead who when alive were great sinners.

"As to your brother lying yonder in his grave, I saw him die, I know all that took place, I am aware of just who was guilty, and I will let his own hand speak in confirmation of what I say to you.

"I am not here to cast ignominy upon the dead, save to prevent harm to the innocent living.

"I know your nature, I read just what you are, and starting upon a false trail you would follow it just as desperately as you would a true one, and live to regret it evermore.

"You would not strike at the heart of the man—pardon me for saying so—that you love, but at the life of one he loves.

"You would punish an innocent woman for doing just what you do—love.

"You cannot say that Major Sandos was pledged to you, and if you looked deep into your own heart you would not have him bound to you and loving another.

"No such man could be faithful to any woman.

"The sorrow is that you loved one who met one he could love as you do him.

"Your brother fell by his hand, and you seize upon it to avenge yourself.

"You would put out of the way the one he loves, and then, if he would come to you and offer you the hand stained with your brother's life, you would take it, put behind you bitter memories, crush under foot haunting thoughts, and believe you were happy in having won him.

"Now, senorita, may I tell you the truth of that duel, for you shall not believe that Major Sandos is a murderer, or that I would lend my aid to any affair of dishonor?"

The woman leant with her back against a tree gazing full upon the face of the Texan, the moonlight revealing each to the other distinctly.

She was cowed by the bold words, the daring eyes, the soft yet determined voice of the man she had encountered.

She had found one who seemed to read her very soul, and one whom her beauty could not fascinate or her imperious manner intimidate.

She had wondered at his daring charges, yet had listened.

Not a word had she missed, and now she said in a subdued tone:

"I will hear your story, senor."

"You will hear the truth."

"Tell me all, everything."

"First, you would not allow Captain Verona to explain, and so you still believe that your brother had but one second."

"Yes."

"It is not so."

"Was there other than Senor Rebello?"

"There was."

"An officer of the lancers?"

"No, one I believe you do not know."

"His name?"

"Don Marlo Fuentes."

"Ah! the Ranchero King?"

"Yes."

"He was also my brother's second?"

"He was."

"I did not know that."

"There is much more that you do not know."

"I wish to know all."

"Are you satisfied with the Ranchero King as second for your brother?"

"From all accounts he could not have had one of more experience in such matters."

"No, Don Marlo Fuentes is well-posted on matters of life and death," was the dry response of the Texan.

"That would indicate that my brother and Captain Rebello had fair play."

"Your brother had more than fair play: such fairness, in fact, that it was Captain Rebello's behavior that brought on a scene between him and the Ranchero King, and the latter it was who killed the Senor Rebello."

"That means that there was a duel between my brother's seconds?"

"Yes, after your brother's death."

"Don Fuentes had an old grudge against the name of Rebello, and when the latter proposed a dishonorable means of arranging the safety of your brother and sure death

of Major Sandos in the duel, the Ranchero King took it as a basis upon which to settle the old score and hence a second meeting followed and Captain Rebello fell."

"Did my brother have even a hint of this plot of Rebello?"

"Of that I cannot say; but let me tell you that in the first meeting between your brother and Major Sandos—"

"There were two then?"

"Yes, and the major received your brother's fire, while he did not return the shot."

The maiden started, stepped nearer to the Texan, and gazed fixedly into his face.

CHAPTER XLVII.

A TRYING ORDEAL.

"Do you mean that Miguel Sandos was fired upon by my brother and did not return the fire?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"He had gone to the field with the belief that it was to be a deadly meeting.

"He thought of your parents and of you, and so took the chances and received your brother's fire."

"And Juan missed?"

"No."

"He wounded Sandos, then?"

"It could hardly be called a wound, for the bullet, aimed at his heart, was caught by a gold miniature and imbedded itself in it."

"A miniature?"

"Yes."

"A woman's?"

"Yes."

"Whose?"

"Major Sandos is not one to wear a miniature of a woman unless he loves her."

"I understand whose it was."

"And it saved his life?"

"It did, the shock stunning him, the gold slightly cutting the flesh."

"I am listening."

"Then it was that Major Sandos asked me to say to your brother that he would not claim his shot if he would grant certain conditions."

"And those conditions?"

"That he should resign from the army."

"Why should he?"

"Major Sandos seemed to feel that he had reasons for his doing so."

"And he refused?"

"He did."

"I glory in his pluck."

"Your brother then demanded a second meeting with pistols, which of course I refused, for the major still had his right to fire."

"Did he do so?"

"He fired at a bird, taking its head off, and as Captain Rebello pressed his claim insultingly, it was the cause of the rupture between him and the Ranchero King."

"And the second meeting between my brother and Major Sandos?"

"The latter put an end to all argument by saying, as Captain Corsala demanded it, he would grant it, but with swords."

"And it was fought?"

"It was, and all of us heard your brother's threat that it was to be a fight to the death."

"And it was, for my brother fell?"

"Yes, Major Sandos ran him through the heart."

"He left no parting word?"

"Nothing."

"Did not speak."

"His death was instantaneous, almost."

"And then?"

"Major Sandos walked away, and the duel between Senor Rebello and the Ranchero King followed, the shots causing the major to return to the scene."

"Who was Senor Rebello's second?"

"Captain Verona."

"And the Ranchero King's?"

"I was."

"Were others present?"

"Two soldiers of your brother's company, two of Major Sandos's troop, and an Indian and negro companion of mine."

"And this is the story of the duel."

"It is."

"And my brother was the challenger?"

"Yes."

"And demanded a second meeting?"

"He did."

"Now, Senor Omohundro, I wish you to answer me a question?"

"Yes, senorita."

"What was the cause of that duel?"

"A dispute between the major and your brother."

"See here, senor, I must know all the truth, if I am to exonerate Sandos."

"Be satisfied with the knowledge you have."

"I will not."

"Why rake over old bones for a grief."

"I must know the truth."

"If I refuse to say more?"

"You promised to tell me the truth, and I demanded that I should know all."

"The truth will only pain you."

"What I have believed about Sandos, who has been my idol, has pained me as deeply as I can be hurt."

"I know that my brother was wild, that he had his faults, was a man of strongest hates, and was, I regret to say, careless of honor in some things, but to know that he was even worse can pain me no more deeply than to feel that Sandos had murdered him as I believed."

"You have read me aright, Senor Texan, and you must know that I shall be satisfied only when I have heard all."

"Then have all you shall, for I believe now in your sense of justice, and that you will forgive where you sought to avenge."

"I will tell you frankly the story, known, by Major Sandos's wish, only to himself and to me, now that your brother is dead, and I will give you the proof of my words."

"The secret Major Sandos kept from Captain Verona even, he hid all of its blackness, and wished it to remain unknown for the sake of you and of your parents, and it is as a dead secret."

"But you demand it and I shall tell it to you, hiding nothing."

"That is what I wish, yes, demand it of you."

"I will tell you how it was that Major Sandos met the lady he loves, how he went to her rescue, and your brother refusing to go, caused the first words between them."

"Your brother met the lady, loved her, and was determined to win her from Major Sandos by foul means as he could not by fair."

"Listen now, for I shall keep back nothing."

Then Texas Jack, driven into telling the story, told how the plot had been made to have the horses dash over the cliff with Major Sandos, of the agreement between Pablo and Captain Corsala, and afterward the capture and confession of the peon.

His capture by her brother and sentence to death with the Tonkaway, the coming of Major Sandos, the tell-tale paper given by Pablo, the sending for the captain to come to the hacienda, and the challenge, all were made known, as well as that the Ranchero King had said that he feared that his principal in the duel was cognizant of Rebello's plot to load one pistol and exchange them, but this he was not sure of.

The beautiful woman, her face as white as ivory, and as motionless, stood there in the moonlight, leaning against the trysting tree, where often she had met Sandos, and heard the whole story of her brother's shame, the story that exonerated Major Sandos.

When Texas Jack had finished she checked the sobs that arose in her bosom, and holding out her hand said:

"Senor, from my inmost heart I thank you for this confession."

"It has saved the innocent from suffering, saved me from wrecking more than my own life."

"I believe all that you have said, and I forgive Miguel Sandos for the taking of my brother's life, and that is saying a great deal."

"I honor him for keeping the dread secret from the world, from my dear old parents and I bless you for your goodness, too, in wishing, for my sake, to bury it."

"Let it rest in oblivion, and may Heaven guard Miguel Sandos and you shall be my fervent prayer."

She held out her hand, grasped that of Texas Jack, and then turned quickly away. He would have aided her, but she threw the bridle-rein over the head of her horse, leaped lightly into the saddle and darted away in the moonlight.

"What a night! what a scene!"

"May I never pass through another such a one."

And going to his horse, Texas Jack mounted and rode rapidly back toward the Buena Vista Hacienda.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

MET ON THE TRAIL.

"Those were the longest two hours of my life."

"I have been under sentence of death, and in many scenes of suspense, but the two hours passed in that timber, with that beautiful Senorita Corsala standing by her brother's grave, was the hardest ordeal I ever passed through."

So said Texas Jack as he rode on the trail to Buena Vista Hacienda, where he had decided to return for the balance of the night that was left to him.

It was nearly dawn when he rode into the plaza, and was shown to the same luxurious room he had before occupied.

Before retiring he had written a letter to Major Sandos, sealed and addressed it, marking it

"Important and Personal."

This he had placed in the hands of the major's faithful valet to be given him upon his return.

Then he had gone to bed, and slept soundly until called four hours after to breakfast.

His horse, left there the day before, had been well cared for and was ready for the road, and, with the animal given him by Major Sandos in lead, he started upon his ride to the river.

He avoided the public trails all that he could, and was most anxious to recross without delay, and to keep out of the sight of any one who might detain him.

He saw on another trail a horseman riding parallel to track he was going, and regretted to see him suddenly wheel from his course and come rapidly toward him.

"I'll not be delayed on this side of the river if I have to hold that fellow up and tie him."

"Too much is at stake on my getting back to camp," he said, as he saw that the shadows were beginning to lengthen as the sun went toward the western horizon.

He was surprised soon after to see the horseman wave his sombrero, and, after a closer glance at him, cried:

"Why, it is dear old Soto!"

He at once drew rein, and five minutes after, Soto, the ex-rebel, drew up by his side.

"The saints bless you, Jack, for you have saved me a long ride."

"What lucky star brought you again into Mexico, and where, I could find you, for I feared I would have to go to the fort or your ranch for you, and I'm not the rugged rider I was when we followed the Stars and Bars together, for wounds and age will tell on a man, you know."

"I am more than glad to see you, old man, I assure you, and glad you have been saved a long ride; but come on to my camp across the river and spend the night with me, for it is only ten miles from here, and we can talk over the cause of your looking me up, for I know it is important."

"Ten miles, Jack, is a long distance, for it means twenty, as I have got to come back, and then I have a day's ride from here back to my home."

"But I'll go, as delaying you here may get you into trouble."

"You'll have a good supper, a night's rest, breakfast, and then can push through to your home to-morrow, so come along, for I will be alone in camp."

"I'll go, Jack," and the two rode along together for a moment in silence, and then Soto said:

"Jack, they are moving."

"The raiders?"

"Yes."

"In much force?"

"Between forty and fifty."

"Where will they cross?"

"At a dozen different fords in parties of two and three."

"And meet at some rendezvous on the other side?"

"Do you know a place known as Lost Canyon?"

"Well."

"That will be their place of rendezvous, and they are to go there by night, and not over three at a time."

They could find no better place, for it is off the wagon-trail, and there is grass, water and timber in plenty, while no one ever goes there unless by accident, or in search of stray cattle."

"It is about ten miles from the Springs where the wagon-train will camp the night it branches off on the trail to the fort."

"Just about."

"Well, they will all be well supplied with provisions, and they will stop there until ready to move, only one of their number acting as spy and going to give them notice if the train is on time or delayed."

"Then they will make a break for the camp?"

"Yes."

"And you say there are about forty of them?"

"I know of forty-three, and there may be a few more to be picked up."

"It would be safe to gamble on fifty, perhaps a few over."

"The more the merrier."

"You think you can stop them, Jack?"

"I think so, Soto, yes, stop them from further trouble," was Texas Jack's laconic response.

CHAPTER XLIX.

IN CAMP.

"I AM very glad, Jack, you can be prepared for those raiders, and I decided to look you up and give you ample warning, for you have been so good to me," said Soto as they rode along together.

"Don't speak of what I did, Soto, for it cost me nothing, and the present was a gift from Pablo the peon."

"Yes, but not what you gave me long before."

"Well, much of that was the chipping in of your old comrades, when I told them you were not a rich man."

"You are ever modest, Jack, but then that is one of the virtues of a brave man."

"Now, Jack, let me tell you to keep your eye on Pablo the peon, for I do not believe he will leave Mexico."

"If he crosses my path again with hostile intent and I see him first, Soto, he'll surely not leave Mexico, unless he goes through underground."

"Well, he was in the village night before last, for I recognized him, and yet he did not remain long."

"I care little about him, Soto; but tell me all else you can about these Robber Rangers."

"They are some of the same gang who were there the day you lassoed their captain."

"Ah! some of the Ranchero King's men then?"

"Yes, but then he employs so many one cannot but look for many of them to be bad."

"Very true."

"They are all well-mounted, and armed with rifles as well as revolvers."

"The son of one of my old cronies in the village gave the whole story away to me when I got him drunk."

"Good! it enables me to get ready for them, for it will be a week yet before the train arrives, or six days at least."

"But here we are at the river, and you follow me across, for there is a very treacherous current here."

"Yes, I have known it well since boyhood."

"But, Jack, I heard that you were a second in the Sandos duel the other day."

"I was asked by the major to be his friend."

"He could have asked none better."

"There is a great deal of talk about it around, and the people all say Captain Corsala and Captain Rebello got just what they deserved, a taste of the medicine they have given others, for they were bad men."

"I have known Corsala since he was a boy, and he was always a wild one; but his father is a noble old man, and his mother one of the sweetest women I ever knew, while his sister is perfectly beautiful."

"Oh, Jack, if you met Juanita Corsala, you would fall desperately in love with her, and I would not blame you."

"I thought, at one time, that Major Sandos and the Senorita Juanita would make a match, but it came to nothing."

"What was the duel about, Jack?"

"The captain considered himself insulted, Soto, and challenged the major."

"Thinking he would not fight, doubtless, as his superior officer; but he was mistaken, for the Sandos's were a fighting race, and the major would fight Old Nick with spurs on."

"He is a noble man, and twice each year the poor are remembered by him."

"He doesn't go to church, or hob-nob with padres, but he carries a great deal more religion around in his heart than many who do."

"So this is your camp, Jack?"

"Yes, old man, and you are welcome."

"It will seem like old times, when we were scouting together, and have many a night slept under the same blanket."

"Yes, and the only blanket we had between us, Soto, while our grub-bag was as flat as a book-mark, and corn hoe-cake and bacon a luxury."

"To-night we'll have a feast, for I have plenty of provisions cached near."

The horses were staked out with the others, the provisions brought out, *serapes* spread, and the fire built, Soto helping with real delight at the reminder of his old camping days when he wore the Confederate gray.

Jack fulfilled his promise to have a feast, for the supper was a grand one, after which they lighted their pipes and smoked and talked for a couple of hours over old times.

At last Jack said:

"Have you any idea, Soto, what ford these Robber Rangers will strike for, if they meet with success or defeat?"

"Yes, if successful they were to go to the nearest ford to the settlement, and if defeated to strike for this one, but cross wherever they could quickest."

"Thanks."

"Will you take a note for me to Captain Verona, at Buena Vista Hacienda, on your way back, Soto?"

"Certainly, Jack."

"I will write it for you in the morning—ah! some one is coming."

It was Boss, and he rode into camp with three led horses, and all of them tired from a long, hard ride.

CHAPTER L.

THE TWO REPORTS.

"Why, Boss, you have not surely been to the ranch? and yet your having these horses with you proves it," said Texas Jack, as the negro threw himself from his saddle.

"Yes, Mars' Jack, I went there, but I didn't let the grass grow under the hoofs of my horse, sir."

"I went straight through, and found the boys up talking over signs one of them had seen on a hunt, and they were preparing to cache things and drive the stock to corral."

"I told them what you said, sir, and two of 'em started right off to give the warning, and I got the horses and came right back, and here I am."

"You have done splendidly, Boss."

"Now get your supper and turn in, for there will be work for us to-morrow, and the Tonkaway will doubtless come in before noon."

Boss saw to his horses, dispatched with evident relish the remains of Texas Jack's and Soto's supper, and then turned in completely worn out.

The Texan and his guest soon after followed his example, and the little camp was as quiet as a graveyard at midnight.

But Boss was up early, had breakfast for the Texan and his friend, and then Texas Jack, having written the letter to Captain Verona, asking him to watch stated for the crossing of Mexicans from Texas within the next week, gave it to Soto, bade him farewell at the river's edge, and returned to camp.

He saw as he approached it that there had been an arrival.

It was the Tonkaway, and his haggard face showed that he had ridden hard and without rest.

His horse had died under him on the trail some ten miles back, but, with his saddle and traps on his shoulders, he had struck a swinging walk and come on to camp.

The Tonkaway had news, and it was important.

He had met a chief of the hostile tribe, played a bold game with him of his having escaped from the fort and made his way to join the Comanches.

He had been welcomed by the chief, who invited him to accompany him to his village, and asked him all about the fort and the numbers there.

The cunning Tonkaway had told him a large force from the fort had been sent northward a few days before, and that there were not over two hundred soldiers in the fort, and they little dreamed of an attack by the Indians.

Then the chief told him that they were going to raid the fort, marching by a trail he told him of.

"That brings them by my ranch, as I expected, Tonk."

"Yes, come that way."

"So be it, but in what force?"

"Have heap many braves—one thousand."

"None too many, they'll find."

"But when do they start?"

"New moon night."

"That will be in just three days and bring them to the fort the night of the fifth, perhaps a little sooner."

"Yes, so Tonkaway think, and he come back heap quick."

"I guess you did."

"But what did you do with the chief?"

"Him fall off cliff with pony."

"Heap big fall, both die."

"I see, you were riding behind him at the time of his fall?"

"Yes, Jack."

"You saw him fall?"

"Me help him."

"Doubtless."

"And his comrades will find him?"

"Yes, be sorry pony fell with him."

"And you are sorry you could not get his scalp."

"Yes, heap sorry, Jack; but no take scalp, or give Tonk away, for know he was killed by enemy, not fall over cliff."

"You have got a very level head on your shoulders, Tonk."

"But you have done splendidly, and we will prepare for our red-skin and Mexican guests."

"You get your breakfast and then take a sleep, for there will be hard work ahead, and I will take a dash for the fort and report just how matters are, and then we will be ready to act."

"I wish you to guide a cavalry force to a place where the red-skins can be headed off on their retreat, and they will have a couple of guns and caissons with them, so you will have to take trails where wheels can go."

"Me understand, just say the name of place."

"I'll give you full particulars, Tonk, and Boss is to go to the fort when we break camp, and push through with the news of the fight there and the retreat of the Indians."

"And you, Jack?"

"I shall guide the cavalry troop to the wagon-train that is coming, so that the Robber Rangers will find they have struck a hornets' nest, and in their retreat I will see that they stumble upon a number of good settlers who know how to handle a gun."

"Kill heap?"

"Yes, it will be a deadly picnic all round, Tonk," was Texas Jack's reply.

CHAPTER LI.

A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

TEXAS JACK was just preparing to mount for his ride to the fort, when Boss reported a horseman in sight across the river, and coming at a good gait.

The Tonkaway was asleep, resting after his hard labors, and so Texas Jack walked

to the bluff with Boss and leveled his glass at the horse and rider.

"Boss?"

"Yes, Mass' Jack."

"That is not a horseman."

"I see him, sir."

"No, you do not see him."

"Lordy, Mass' Jack, what's the matter with your glass?"

"It is better than your eyes, Boss."

Boss shook his head, and Texas Jack continued:

"It is a horse and rider."

"So I said, sir."

"No, you said it was a horseman."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, it is a horse and lady rider."

"Lady?"

"I was fooled then, sure."

"Yes, and she is coming straight to the ferry, and she must not see us."

"She mighty brave to come here all alone."

They retreated from the bluff and waited, but from a place of concealment among the bushes, they saw her ride to the river and boldly enter.

But Texas Jack waited to see no more, for his quick eye discovered that she was taking the blind ford, as was called one place that looked as though it was a shallow crossing.

The ford was several hundred yards above Texas Jack's camp, and he sped down toward the river, bounding down the steep trail, and calling out to Boss:

"Saddle my horse and bring him to me with all haste!"

"Don't forget my lasso!"

"She will be in Deadman's Whirlpool the way she has taken!"

Boss sprung to obey, the Tonkaway, aroused by Jack's voice, was upon his feet in an instant and away dashed the Texan down the trail.

When he came to the shore he beheld just what he had feared.

The horse of the lady rider had gotten into quicksand, had plunged on to get rid of it into deep water and was swept rapidly away by the surging current there toward an eddy.

The brave rider kept perfectly cool, looked about her for a place to land and urged her horse toward a spot where she thought he could get a footing.

But then, to her horror, she discovered that she had been washed into a whirlpool, from which the most strenuous efforts of the animal were in vain to extricate himself.

He struggled nobly, and she urged him on, but twice had been swept around in the eddy.

Just then Texas Jack arrived and he made his way within fifty feet of her, and called out:

"Keep calm, señorita, for help is at hand!"

"Ah! Señor Omohundro!"

"Yes, Señorita Corsala."

"Is this retributive justice on me?"

"No, you deserve no harm—here comes my horse and I will save you."

He turned as Boss rode up and leaped from the saddle.

"Here, Boss, take the end of this lariat, and make it fast around that tree," and Texas Jack bounded into the saddle and urged his horse into the surging waters.

The animal swam strong and rapidly, and was soon in the whirlpool and within reach of the drowning horse of the Mexican maiden.

But Texas Jack grasped the señorita about the waist and lifted her from the saddle, at the same time catching the rein of her horse and holding to it, while he called out:

"Now, Boss, pull hard and steady."

"Thank God, there comes the Tonkaway!"

The Tonkaway came upon the scene with a bound, and with a quick whirl about his head he cast his lasso.

It settled over the shoulders of Texas Jack, who shouted:

"Bravo, Tonk!"

"Now pull together."

But the whirlpool was a fierce one, and it was full a minute of terrible suspense before the great strength of the two men, the red skin and the negro, began to tell.

They first steadied the horses, Texas Jack holding the lariat thrown him by the Tonkaway in one hand, and the other clasping

the form of Señorita Juanita, who uttered no word and was perfectly calm in the presence of her great danger of death.

The rein supported the tired horse of the señorita, and he struggled for life again with desperate energy, while, feeling the pull on him that showed he was being snatched from death, the splendid animal of Texas Jack aided the rescuers greatly.

Slowly but surely the force of the whirling waters was overcome, and after a long, hard struggle the two horses tottered out upon the shore, the animal of the Señorita Corsala dropping dead in his tracks as he reached the trail.

"Now, señorita, you are safe," said Texas Jack. "My camp is upon the bluff, and I will transfer your saddle to my horse, and we will soon be there."

"Push on, Boss, and have a good fire, though fortunately, señorita, your skirt only is wet."

"Yes, thanks to you, my life is spared, Señor Omohundro; and can one owe another more than life?"

"Do not speak of it, señorita, please."

"There, now let me raise you to the saddle."

And with a glance at her dead horse, she said:

"Poor Bonito! he died in my behalf," and tears came into her beautiful eyes, and in silence she rode on up to the Texan's camp.

CHAPTER LII.

JUANITA'S REQUEST.

"AND this is your camp, señor?"

So asked Señorita Corsala as she glanced about her when she had reached the camp and been aided from her horse by Texas Jack, who led her to the fire which Boss had built to dry her skirts.

"Yes, señorita, a temporary camp only."

"You live far from here?"

"Yes, many miles."

"You are a ranchero, I believe."

"I am now, but also a ranger, scout and Indian-fighter, señorita."

"You like your wild, dangerous life, then?"

"I know no other than a life of danger, señorita."

"You must have kindred who are ever anxious about you?"

"None so near as to worry about me."

"I am contented, happy I may say. I try to be of service to my fellow-man and lay up a little nest-egg for a rainy day."

"I love the prairies, the mountains, my horses and cattle."

"I have comrades I respect, admire and feel an affection for—these two now with me, a red-skin and a negro."

"Yes, I suppose I am happy, and what more can I ask, though there are shadows in life often, clouds that will not always away at one's bidding."

"Captain Omohundro, you are a very remarkable man, and I shall be the better for knowing you."

"I have heard much of you, but I had pictured a very different man from what you are."

"Yes, you pictured a desperado, I suppose, or reckless gambler, at war with his fellow-men, and called in by honest men to aid them, simply because I could be useful."

"But, señorita, that is the fault of circumstances that plainmen are often painted so, as one desperado will give a score of honest bordermen a bad name."

"Well, I believe I know you as you are, a Texas gentleman, and I am glad indeed to know you independent of the services you have rendered me."

"But do you not feel surprise at my coming here?"

"Yes, I was surprised to recognize you, and see you alone."

"You have not asked why I am here."

"It is not my affair, señorita, to meddle with your actions."

"I came for a purpose you may guess."

"Was it a desire to see the scene of your brother's death?"

"It was."

"It was here."

"In this camp?"

"On yonder bluff, where I stood when I saw you coming."

"Will you take me there, for my habit is rapidly drying?"

"Certainly, if you wish."

"I do wish; I desire to see where each one stood, to behold the scene that met their eyes as they faced death, to gaze upon the last objects that met my poor brother's eyes, to see where he fell."

"It will only give you pain, senorita."

"It is a pain I seek to feel."

"I will go with you."

They went toward the scene of the double duel, and Texas Jack explained the position of the duelists, and showed the spot where Juan Corsala fell.

"Poor Juan."

"He was my brother, and so I condone his sins."

"And poor Miguel Sandos, for I know that he feels too, and deeply, for I believe I understand his nature."

"You have witnessed many death-scenes, senor, in your checkered life?"

"Alas, far too many I have been forced to witness," was the Texan's sad reply.

"Senor Omohundro?"

"Yes, Senorita Corsala."

"Is it far from here to Fort Blanco?"

"Yes, quite a long, hard ride."

"You know the trail there well?"

"Yes, senorita."

"What would you say if I urged you to take me there?"

"I would advise against it."

"Why?"

"You are a long way from your home, senorita, and can do no more than return there by night."

"I believe that you fear to have me go?"

"If you think that I have such an opinion of you I will say go at once."

"I wish to see her."

"Miss Elwood?"

"Yes."

"I should think the meeting could only be painful."

"I hoped to find some reason for going there when I left home."

"May I ask your real motive?"

"You only saw the evil side of my brother's nature, and yet he had a higher, brighter side."

"He had his virtues, which though far outnumbered by his faults are yet remembered by those who loved him."

"I feel no doubt of that, senorita."

"But let me tell you that he was an artist, one of such talent that he would have made a name for himself had he taken to art instead of the army, and his nature would have been differently molded, he would have been a better man, for one's associations, profession and surroundings have much to do with marring or making a man, shaping his destiny for good or evil."

"I know you are right in that, senorita."

"Now, my brother fell in love with Miss Elwood."

"It was the only love affair of his life, where he made a woman his idol."

"In some way he got possession of a beautiful photograph of Miss Elwood, and he painted a portrait of her."

"From that portrait he made a beautiful copy of a miniature likeness on ivory, and set it in a gold frame, and this, with a chain, was suspended about his neck."

"It was there when he was killed and I took it from his neck, and recognized it as a copy of the portrait which hangs in his room at home."

"Now, a miniature of Miss Elwood saved Major Sandos from my brother's bullet, and it was shattered."

"My wish, therefore, is to present to Miss Elwood this miniature portrait by my brother, worn by him in secret adoration of her, hanging over his heart when the sword of Major Sandos pierced it, and ask her to give it to the man she loves, asking him to wear it for her sake, and as a token that he forgives in his grave the man who was his foe in life."

"Here is the miniature, senor, and will you take me to the fort that I may present it to Miss Elwood, for it will prove that I forgive Sandos for killing poor Juan, and her for winning from me the one I loved."

CHAPTER LIII.

THE RIDE TO THE FORT.

TEXAS JACK took the miniature and glanced at it.

It was oval in form, with a solid gold back,

and on the other side the face on ivory covered with glass.

The Texan was amazed at the beauty of the work.

It bespoke, indeed, the artist; and he gazed long upon the miniature likeness of the beautiful face of Estelle Elwood.

It was perfect as a likeness, and most artistic in execution.

Senorita Corsala seemed to be pleased with the Texan's admiration of the miniature, and said:

"You seem to recognize that it is a clever piece of work?"

"Yes, it is beautiful."

"Is it like her?"

"A perfect likeness."

"Your brother was indeed a clever artist, Senorita Corsala."

"Then it is worthy to present to her as a souvenir."

"Oh, yes, and Miss Elwood could hardly refuse such a gift, offered as it is to her, nor would Major Sandos, I believe, decline to wear it as a proof that he holds no ill-will to one in his grave."

"Then you will take me to the fort?" she said pleadingly.

"I was about to start for the fort when I saw you coming, so I will have Boss put your saddle and bridle upon one of my best horses, and take you with me; but I will be there but a short time."

"I will return with you whenever you are ready."

"Then we will go, and I will escort you across the river to the nearest hacienda, where you can be sheltered for the night; but I warn you that it will be a ride that will tax the strength of a strong man, and you have already come many miles to-day and met with a very exciting adventure."

"I am proof against fatigue, and will be ready when you are."

The horses were soon ready, and mounting, the two set off at a rapid canter, Texas Jack setting a pace which he knew would get them there soon after noon.

The beautiful girl rode with ease and exquisite grace, talked pleasantly as they dashed along, and seemed determined that Texas Jack should not be bored with her grief and her troubles.

She admired the scenery, asked him much about his own life, spoke of her own country and its picturesque people, and said:

"Mexico will be improved greatly by having such a nation as yours adjoining it."

"You taught us the art of war when we battled with you, and though many of us may never forgive the whipping you gave us, the thinkers of our race will do so and profit by it."

Texas Jack was surprised and delighted to hear her talk as she did, and he found that she was wonderfully well posted upon the affairs of the world.

Several times she turned her conversation upon the Ranchero King, once saying:

"I have a great longing to see that most mysterious man, Senor Omohundro."

"Some day you may."

"I was tempted to go to his Hacienda del Monte, ask to see him and have him tell me, from his standpoint, the particulars of my brother's duel."

"Why did you not do so?"

"I checked myself when a mile on the trail this morning to his mountain ranch."

"But why?"

"I had told you that I trusted you, and I did not feel that it would be fair to you."

"Your heart is in the right place after all, Senorita Corsala," said Texas Jack warmly.

"My heart?"

"I have none now," she said sadly, and then suddenly asked:

"What is that red speck in the sky yonder, senor?"

"I was just going to call your attention to it, senorita—it is the flag waving over Fort Blanco."

"How you Americans love your flag, senor."

"Yes, it is the flag of a most patriotic people."

"Yet you, as a Confederate, strove to tear that flag down?"

"I believe, senorita, that no one who is not a Southerner, can understand, can appreciate how we felt in the late war."

"We were reared to love our common country, yes, but our homes were the dearest spot on earth to us, and our belief in the right of our State, that it was paramount."

"We went into the war thus from principle, offering our lives as willingly as did the defenders of the Union."

"We were conquered, and when our banner was furled we laid down our arms and accepted the situation, and to-day Southern men would be as ready to defend the Stars and Stripes, to battle for the Union, as they were to die under the bonnie Blue Flag and fight for Dixie Land."

"You plead your cause well, senor; but we are rapidly approaching the fort and our coming has been observed."

"Yes, the sentinel has reported us, and within fifteen minutes we will enter the fort."

"I will take you at once to headquarters and make known to Colonel Elwood that you desire to see his daughter."

Soon after the Texan and his fair companion rode up to headquarters and were met by Colonel Elwood himself.

CHAPTER LIV.

ESTELLE'S VISITOR.

TEXAS JACK felt embarrassed as Colonel Elwood, recognizing him, and seeing that he was accompanied by a lady, advanced courteously to meet them.

"Ah, Omohundro, glad to see you," he called out pleasantly, and added:

"I was expecting you, or a messenger from you."

"I deemed it important to come myself, sir."

"But may I present, Colonel Elwood, the Senorita Corsala, the sister of Captain Juan Corsala, and who visits the fort for a special reason?"

The colonel slightly started at the name, but he was too courteous to show any feeling, and was not one to follow the cruel law of visiting upon the children the sins of the parents, transposed to fit Juanita Corsala's case.

He saw only a very beautiful young girl, with great, sad, dark eyes, and he held forth his hand, greeting her cordially, and lifting her from her saddle, said in Spanish, which he spoke fluently:

"You are welcome, Senorita Corsala."

"Come in and my daughter will see to your comfort after your long ride."

To his surprise, she replied in English, with only the slightest of pretty accents:

"I thank you, Senor Colonel, for your welcome of a perfect stranger, and I shall be glad to meet Miss Elwood, but detain her only a few minutes, as I must return with Senor Omohundro."

"No, no, we cannot allow such a thing, for we shall order out the guard and hold you a prisoner, Senorita Corsala."

"Nay, Senor Colonel, but I must return, as I have to return to my anxious and now sorrowing parents, so when the Senor Omohundro is prepared to start I shall be ready."

"Well, senorita, he will have to remain for a long conference with me, and then we will have dinner—ah! here is my daughter now," and taking Senorita Corsala by the hand the colonel led her forward and said:

"Estelle, this is the Senorita Corsala, whom our friend Omohundro has brought to visit us."

If Estelle Elwood was surprised, she was too thoroughly polite to show any trace of it, and though she heard the name distinctly, her father, to show just who she was to welcome, added:

"We have often heard Senorita Corsala spoken of by her brother."

At once did Estelle see the sad, beautiful eyes fill with tears, and she, too, would not set against Juanita Corsala the sin of her brother.

She had indeed heard the captain speak often of his beautiful sister and her noble nature, and Major Sandos had frankly told her of his sincere friendship for her and that her character was one to admire and love.

"I am so glad to meet you, Senorita Corsala, and it was kind of you to come and see me—yes, and kind of you, Texas Jack," and she grasped the Texan's hand, who gave a quick glance at Juanita, who seemed to read his look aright, as saying:

"And that is the noble, beautiful girl you wished to be avenged on?"

The welcome of Estelle and the colonel touched the poor girl deeply, and seeing that she was too full to speak, she was quickly led away by her fair hostess to her own room.

There Juanita Corsala broke down, and, burying her face in her hands, had a good cry.

It did her a world of good, and looking up after a while, she said:

"I have to ask you to forgive me, Senorita Estelle, for I had cruel thoughts against you once—yes, I believed that Major Sandos had killed my brother on your account.

"But I know better now, I know the whole truth, the whole sad affair, for Senor Omohundro came to me and told me all.

"Now, in my heart there is not a shadow of feeling against you, or one unkind thought against Miguel Sandos.

"I know the truth, and when I heard it all, I wished to see the spot where the duel was fought, where my unfortunate brother died.

"I left my home, telling my parents if I did not return to-night not to feel anxious, and then I rode hard to visit the fatal scene.

"It was very nearly fatal to me, and but for that noble Texan would have been, for he rescued me when I was swept into the whirlpool at the ford, against which I had been warned; but I thought I was going right.

"He showed me the scene where Brother Juan fell, and then I horrified him by asking him to bring me to see you."

"I am so glad that he did."

"How good you are to me; how beautiful you are.

"I do not wonder that men love you."

"You persuaded Mr. Omohundro, or Texas Jack, as we know him best at the fort, to fetch you?"

"Yes, though he urged hard against it, said he had no right to do so, that I would be belated in getting home, that it was a ride to break down a strong man, and yet I pleaded and he yielded, and here I am."

"And you are very welcome, and must remain just as long as you please."

"Oh, no; I must return with Texas Jack, as you call him.

"Yes, but I have a mission in coming here, a favor to ask of you."

CHAPTER LV.

A FAVOR GRANTED.

"ANYTHING in my power to do for you, Senorita Corsala, it will be my pleasure to do," said Estelle, wondering what favor her fair visitor could ask of her.

"You knew my brother?"

"Yes, we met him, quite often when he visited the fort to see Major Sandos."

"Did you ever give him a photograph of yourself?"

"Never!"

"Have you one that you deem a good one?"

"I had, but it was abstracted from my album by some one, and I regret its loss exceedingly, as it was my father's and the only one I had."

"Did you know any of my brother's good qualities, for, alas, he had so many evil ones?"

"Speak not ill of the dead," said Estelle almost sternly.

"Thank you for those kind words; but far from me to speak ill of poor Juan.

"I knew his faults, his follies and his virtues, and now I know his great sin against Sandos."

"It was cruel for you to hear aught of him that was evil."

"It could not be helped, it was necessary, and I say God bless the one who told me, for it changed my life.

"My brother had good qualities, though, and let me ask if you ever knew him as an artist?"

"I remember he once made a number of most clever pencil-sketches of us here, and I have them."

"Senorita Elwood, he was a great artist, but kept it from the world that he had talent."

"He it was who took that photograph

from your album, and he took it to paint a portrait of you.

"This he did, and the portrait hangs in my brother's room at home, and is life-size and handsomely framed.

"I shall present it to your father, but the photograph I shall keep for my own—as a fair exchange."

"You are certainly most kind and welcome to it."

"Now, I have with me a proof of his talent, of his work, and that is the favor I have to ask of you, that you accept it, but for another.

"Pardon me if I tell you that I know that you are engaged to Major Sandos.

"I do not blame you for loving him, I do not wonder at his loving you.

"But let me tell you that I also know that your miniature likeness saved his life from my brother's bullet.

"Let me tell you that my brother, though he may never have told you so, made you his idol.

"You were to him 'that other life without whose love his life was incomplete.'"

"He showed his love in that portrait, and he revealed it again and still more in painting a miniature of you, and having it set with gold."

"It was his secret to wear it swung to a gold chain and suspended over his heart."

"He had it there when he died, and I removed it after death, no one else seeing it, no one else knowing of this secret love."

"Your miniature protected Sandos from death, but it did not save Juan."

"The blade of Major Sandos entered the heart within a quarter of an inch from where it rested."

"I ask you now to forgive poor Juan—"

"Most willingly."

"Nay, hear me."

"I wish you to forgive him, and to have Miguel Sandos forgive him, and, as a proof of his whole forgiveness, ask him to wear this in the place of the one the bullet shattered, this my brother's work, of you."

She placed the gold case and chain in Estelle's hand as she spoke.

Estelle started, turned it over, glanced at the clever work, and involuntarily cried:

"Oh, how beautiful—the work, I mean."

"It is the image of you, and painting it was the work of love and inspiration."

"Will you give it to Miguel Sandos?"

"Gladly!"

"Will he wear it, think you, in token of his forgiveness of the man he placed in his grave?"

"If he does not, then Major Sandos is not the man I believe him to be."

"Well said, and your words convince me that he will do so; but now I must see if Texas Jack is ready to return."

"Why, how forgetful, how cruel I have been, to allow you to sit here uncared for, and after your adventure in the river, where of course you got wet."

"It was in vain for Senorita Corsala to plead, for Estelle would have her own way, and she was soon robed in some of her fair hostess's clothing while her own was sent to be fully dried and pressed."

Thus robed she went down to dinner with Estelle, and they found that Texas Jack had been kept by the colonel as a guest also.

From the Texan the colonel had heard the story of why Senorita Corsala had visited the fort, and he greeted her most tenderly, and made her feel that she was welcome indeed.

He had also heard Texas Jack's report of what the Indians were about, as told by the Tonkaway, and of Boss's visit to the ranch and warning the few ranchers of danger.

Soto's coming and story was also told, and calling his officers together, Colonel Elwood placed the whole matter before them, the cavalry were ordered to leave the fort that night and report at Texas Jack's camp, where they would remove to their respective posts, and those who were to remain and defend the fort were instructed to get ready at once to resist an attack, while the scouts were to be sent out and give ample warning, so that the cattle and horses could be driven into the corrals, and the red-skins given a surprise when they expected to surprise.

It was just three hours after their arrival at the fort, that Texas Jack and Senorita Corsala mounted and rode away upon their return, Estelle kissing the Mexican beauty

good-by and promising some day to see her again.

"Now we must ride for it hard, for it will be night before we reach my camp," and the Texan set the pace.

CHAPTER LVI.

THE NIGHT RIDE.

THE rest and change at the fort, with a good dinner had completely rested Juanita Corsala, and Texas Jack found her boast of endurance not overdrawn, for she went flying along by his side with not the slightest show of fatigue.

She seemed really light-hearted too, for there was a great weight lifted from her mind, and she talked cheerily to the Texan as they rode along in a sweeping gallop.

The fact that the night was before her, that she was alone, many leagues from her home, and upon the American side of the Rio Grande, though it troubled Jack Omohundro greatly did not disturb her in the least, or she did not show it if she felt any anxiety about it.

It was some time after night when camp was reached, but Boss and the Tonkaway were on the alert, and the former soon had a good supper ready.

"Now, senorita, it is ten o'clock, and if you will take my wicky-up I will turn in with the boys, and you can get a good night's rest and be refreshed for your ride to-morrow."

"My dear Senor Jack, the only thing that worries me is that I am so much trouble to you."

"Now I must start home to-night, and I know that you will not allow me to go alone."

"Further, I have got to deprive you of one of your horses."

"That is of little moment; but are you not afraid to risk the river to-night?"

"Not in the least, with you for my guide."

"Well, I will be your guide, and push straight on home with you, for it will never do to allow you to ride a mile alone at night."

"I do not fear to do so, and with a good horse would have no dread; but I know that your duties call you here in the morning, to meet some soldiers, and I will make a suggestion."

"Yes, senorita."

"You and the Tonkaway—for you must not return alone through Mexico—ride with me to the Buena Vista Ranch."

"You know Captain Verona, so make a request of him for an escort of several soldiers, to conduct me home."

"Say that I am a lady going to the Corsala Hacienda and got belated, and you need not mention who I am, and my veil, which I will put on, will prevent recognition by any one of the men who might know me."

"This would enable me to reach home before dawn, and you to get back to your camp by sunrise at furthest, though it will cause you a night's unrest, following upon your day of hard labor."

"It is the best plan, senorita, but pray do not think of me in the matter, for you are the one only to consider."

"You will take the Tonkaway?"

"It will break in upon his rest."

"You are thoughtful of him, but he must go, as I would not feel safe if you returned alone, but with the two of you I have not half the dread."

Texas Jack laughed and said:

"It is pleasant to have one think of the danger we must meet, senorita; but when you are ready we will be," and he walked away to call the Tonkaway.

He was glad to go, for he did not like to see Texas Jack enter Mexico alone, and the party were soon mounted on fresh horses and on their way, Boss going down to the river with them to watch them cross.

Juanita Corsala cast a lingering look at the scene of the duel as she rode by, and she shuddered as they rode into the black waters, for she recalled how near had been death to her there only a few hours before.

But Texas Jack knew the crossing well and kept hold of her bridle rein; but she gave a sigh of relief when they were across on Mexican soil.

"Really, Senor Jack, if you will allow, I

can dash on from here alone, for I have nothing to fear," she said.

"No, indeed, I shall leave you only in safe hands," was the answer.

Knowing what his horses could stand Texas Jack put them at it, and the pace was but little slackened all the way to Buena Vista Hacienda.

The challenge of the sentinel was answered by Texas Jack, and the sergeant readily granted the escort for him, as he had his orders from the major, without disturbing Captain Verona.

A fresh horse was secured for Senorita Corsala, who kept herself well veiled, and as the escort rode up she held out her hand to the Tonkaway, and then to the Texan, saying in a low voice:

"Adios, Senor Jack, and Heaven bless you."

"When you come near the Corsala Hacienda again come and see me, and your welcome shall be more hospitable than the one given you in the timber island at our first meeting."

"Fortune ever attend you—adios."

She rode away in the midst of the escort, while Texas Jack and the Tonkaway, with the horse the senorita had ridden in lead, started back for the Texas shore.

The sun was gilding the eastern horizon when they came near the river, and arriving there, they discovered three Mexicans preparing to go across, and one of whom said:

"You know this ford, senor? for we are traders, anxious to get over."

"Oh, yes; I know the ford well, and will guide you across."

"Just follow me, senors, and you'll not go wrong."

And as he moved into the stream he said to the Tonkaway in his own tongue:

"Keep in their rear and watch them."

"They are game we want, and be ready to act at a signal from me."

"Ugh!" grunted the Tonkaway, and the crossing of the river was begun.

CHAPTER LVII.

THREE OF A KIND.

TEXAS JACK had recognized the three men as being of the party who had attempted the killing of Major Sandos.

He did not pretend to know them, but saw from their signs and glances that they knew him well.

If they had intended to avenge the death of their leader by him when in Mexico, he felt very sure they would not be deterred from doing so after crossing into Texas.

So his mind was made up for action the moment that he saw them.

By their own confession, the day he broke the neck of their leader with his lasso, they were cowboys from the Ranchero King's ranch, and the latter had denounced their lawless acts when he had appeared upon the scene.

What then were they going into Texas for?

They had said that they were traders, and yet they were armed and equipped for a long trail or a fight.

They could be but one thing, have but one motive in crossing into Texas, and that was for lawlessness.

Soto had said that the Robber Rangers would cross by twos and threes.

Here were three of them, three of a kind, crossing at a ford very seldom used, and they certainly belonged to the Robber Ranger band.

Did he wait until he reached the other shore, they might shoot him and the Tonkaway down without warning.

So Texas Jack eyed the bluff closely, hoping that Boss saw their coming, as it was now good daylight and he would be on the watch for them.

Seeing them, he would also have seen the three men at the ford before them, and his sense of danger would be aroused.

But Texas Jack did not see Boss, and he must depend upon himself and the Tonkaway alone.

They were nearing the other shore, when Texas Jack halted as though at fault, and said:

"A man has to go it very slow crossing here, for there is a blind ford, and once in it you are caught by quicksand, and then comes the whirlpool."

"It's called Deathman's Ford, jinks, but so many have gone under here."

"You just go slow as you are and we'll take this shoal, but if you feel any quicksand turn back only too quick."

The men were evidently alarmed, and huddled together very cautiously.

They were not over a hundred feet from the other shore, but death might lie between them and there.

In reality Texas Jack was in no danger, for well he knew the ford, and it was a straight ride for the shore.

Still, to a stranger to the crossing there was danger, and a few yards away was the whirling stream ready to pull them to instant death, did they miss a solid footing for their horses.

The moment that he got them where he wished them, Texas Jack's hands suddenly were thrown forward, a revolver in each, and his voice rung like a trumpet as he shouted:

"Hands up, all of you, and quick about it!"

The Tonkaway had governed his actions by Jack's, and his revolvers were as quickly drawn, almost, and covering the three men.

They were taken completely by surprise, for they had simply been anticipated in their own game the moment they got across the river.

But they were three to one, and one of them who was partially shielded by the forms of his comrades, managed to draw a gun.

He never got a chance to use it, as a shot came from the bushes on the shore, and he fell backward from his saddle, was seized by the current and dragged into the whirlpool.

His two companions in horror watched his fate, but Texas Jack and the Tonkaway were not to be caught off their guard, and they now each one covered their man, the Indian shifting to his rifle as more sure than his revolver.

But the men saw their comrade dragged to death.

They dared not move their horses for fear of the fearful whirlpool, and they were now sure that the Texan and his Indian comrade had help ashore.

There was nothing left for them to do but to surrender and play innocent, and their hands were quickly raised.

"Ride straight up of them, Tonk, and take their guns."

This was done.

"Now lead the way ashore, and I'll keep them covered, and Boss, be ready for another shot if they begin any monkey business."

"Yes, sir!"

"Curamba! are we not doing as you order us?"

"Do you intend to murder innocent men?"

They asked the questions anxiously, and Texas Jack answered:

"Innocent men is good."

"Yes, if you attempt any play not in our game, we intend to kill you."

"I drew three of a kind and now have a pair, but we can more than match you, for I know you both."

"We are honest traders."

"Yes, you trade in stolen goods, and kill to get gold."

"There, now we have you," and the prisoners reached the shore, where Boss stepped from the bushes and grasped the reins of their horses, the Tonkaway leading the one of the man who had been wounded and swept into the whirlpool.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE OUTLAW'S CONFESSION.

"You saw us coming then, Boss?"

"Yes, Mars' Jack."

"And as usual was on hand to chip in?"

"I was watching for you just at day, sir, and saw those three men at the ford."

"Then I saw you and the chief coming, and it seemed to fluster these men, and so I got ready with my rifle to see if I was needed."

"You sent that fellow to the happy hunting grounds very quick."

"Well I had to, Mars' Jack, or I could be sure but I was out of my saddle and the whirlpool did the rest, sir."

"Now they are secured, you must give

them some breakfast, and when the cavalry comes, I wish you to go on to the fort to bring us the news when the Indians strike there."

"I will tell you just where to find me."

"Yes, sir."

"You can take the two prisoners with you and present them to Colonel Elwood with my compliments."

"Yes, Mars' Jack, he'll be glad to get such a present."

"Be careful that they do not get away from you."

"If they do, sir, it will not be my fault."

"Now let us have breakfast as soon as you can, and I'll have a talk with these two fellows."

"Better play lone hands with 'em, Mars' Jack, for then you can find out which is the greatest liar."

"You are right, Boss," and Texas Jack went to where the two prisoners were under the care of the Tonkaway, and led one of them over to the bluff, out of sight of the other.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?" asked Texas Jack in English.

"I do not understand much English," the man replied with an accent.

"You are better versed in deviltry; but you do speak good English, all of you Robber Rangers do, and in fact a very poor specimen of Spanish."

"I am a Mexican."

"That is stamped on your face."

"I am no Robber Ranger."

"You are just that."

"I am an honest trader."

"If you were ever honest you belie your looks."

"Come, I know you, for you were along the day I yanked your leader with my lasso and broke his neck."

"You belong to the Ranchero King's outfit, and, as he said are some of the black sheep he has to take along with the white ones."

"You see I know you, and more. I am aware where you are going, that you are to rendezvous at a canyon where you are to meet the balance of your gang, and then proceed down upon the wagon-trail on its way to Fort Blanco."

"You have stirred the Commanding up to making a move to help you out, and you thought the cards were all going your way, when the fact is you do not lead a single tramp, and it is very likely you will be turned about with a number of others of your kind before the week is out."

"Now say I don't know my lasso and your mouth will tell what your face disposes, as you are simply appalled, scared half out of your wits to see that I've got your whole gang down to a fine point."

The men's faces did show utter consternation, which he could not hide, and he looked at Texas Jack in a helpless, terrified sort of way that was pitiable.

"Come, talk quick and to the point."

"What have you to say?"

"Can I buy my life?"

"What is your information worth?"

"My life and freedom."

"Your life is of precious little value, but your being free is a consideration as you might do a great deal of harm."

"I'll sell out for my life, my freedom and a little gold."

"You'll get not a peso, your life I'll barter for, but I am not so sure about letting you go free, for there is room in the Texan Penitentiary for you."

"I'll sell for my life and liberty."

"Deliver the goods then, and I'll know their worth."

"You'll let me go free then?"

"Yes, with your horse and outfit, just as found you."

"Well, you are right about the raid upon the wagon-train."

"That is no news."

"And the Indian troubles?"

"I told you that much."

"Now what force have your Raiders?"

"Without us, fifty-three."

"Who is their chief?"

"A Texan who is in the service of the Ranchero King."

"His name?"

"Back Parker."

"I have heard of him."

"He is a murderer who escaped from prison in Texas."

"Yes, and he is the secret chief of the band of Robber Rangers that give the Ranchero King so much trouble."

"And Don Fuentes tries to stop this lawlessness?"

"He does to the tune of killing any man he really believes guilty, for he tries them by his own law."

"But then he has nearly three hundred men in his employ, and of course many are of the lawless kind, and have a secret band among them, known as the Robber Rangers, and they do the work of robbery and raiding."

"Now let me go, for I can tell no more."

"I will keep my word, and set you free—after the raid is over," was the Texan's reply.

CHAPTER LIX.

A LEAP FOR LIFE.

THE Texan seemed pleased with the information he had obtained from the prisoner, and the latter was completely crushed when he learned that he was not to be set free until after the raid was over.

"You said you would," he whined.

"I mentioned no time, and I would be a nice fellow to set you free, have you warn your comrades and dash with them on to catch the train at another point."

"I'm no fool, pard, and don't you pick me up for one."

With this he led the prisoner over to where Boss was preparing breakfast.

"Keep your eye on him, Boss."

Then he went after the other man, and sent the Tonkaway to look after his comrade, thus keeping the two from meeting after his talk with the first one.

"Well, I've got the story from your pard, so do you wish to sell out too?"

"I've got nothing to sell."

"Don't be a fool, for I know about the Indians moving on the fort, you raiders rendezvousing to attack the Government wagon train, that Buck Parker is your secret chief, most of you belong to the cowboy bands of the Ranchero King, and that within three or four days there will be a hemp picnic in Texas when a score of you fellows will be sent on a trail that ends in the grave."

"You know it all and that hangs me with the rest, I guess, except that traitor who has just sold out."

"And you have no news to trade?"

"No, I'm a bad man, but no traitor to them that trust me," and quickly he added:

"But I won't hang."

With the last words he leaped suddenly from the bluff far out over the edge.

He and his comrade had been disarmed, and their hands tied to their belts; but his hands were small, he had managed to slip them out of the ropes, and his first thought seemed to leap upon the Texan and try conclusions with him.

But a glance at Texas Jack's splendid physique caused him to think better of that, and he took the desperate leap as a chance to escape.

He seemed to hover an instant in the air, and then shot down feet foremost.

It was considerably over a hundred feet to the water, and Texas Jack saw him strike it and disappear, a defiant shout breaking from his lips as he touched the current.

Up dashed the Tonkaway and Boss, the former dragging the other outlaw with him, the latter with his rifle.

As they watched they saw the man, after a long suspense, appear and strike out for the Mexican shore.

Boss threw his rifle to his shoulder, but Texas Jack knocked up the barrel and the bullet flew upward.

"No, Boss, he cannot escape the whirlpool, so do not kill a drowning man."

"He is a brave fellow, and made a splendid leap for life."

"By Heaven, but I will save him!"

He ran to his saddle, secured his lariat and bounded down the trail to the spot where he had gone to rescue the Senorita Corsala.

The others watched him from the bluff.

When he reached the shore, he saw that the brave fellow was still in the whirlpool

and struggling hard to break from it and reach the other shore.

But in vain his struggles, and Texas Jack called out:

"Catch my lariat as you come around again, and I will drag you ashore."

"To be hanged at the end of it a few days hence—oh no!"

"You will drown, then."

"I took my chances."

"Take the lariat-end as I throw it."

"No, I will accept my fate," and the voice was weaker.

"I will give you your liberty if you do, when this raid is over."

"You are more worthy of it by far than your comrade."

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes."

"You are Texas Jack?"

"Yes."

"You would not swear to a lie?"

"I would not."

"I mean what I say."

"You will set me free when the raid of the Robber Rangers is over?"

"I will."

"I will take your word, so throw your lasso, as I am about used up and this circle is narrowing."

Texas Jack had already coiled his lasso and he made a good throw of it, the noose settling directly over the man's upraised hand.

He made a quick turn of it about his body and said:

"Pull away, for I can be of little use."

And Texas Jack did pull away, hard, strong and with a will that at last dragged the man ashore.

As he tottered out upon the sands he held out his hand to him and said:

"You are a brave fellow."

"What is your name?"

"Buck Parker," was the response that fairly startled Texas Jack, and the man stood smiling at his surprise as he panted like a hound from his tremendous exertions.

For a moment only was Texas Jack non-plused, to feel that he had spared the outlaw chief, the man of all men whom he wanted, captain of the Robber Rangers, and then he burst out into a hearty laugh and said:

"Well, pard, you have done me beautifully."

"And you have done for me, Texas Jack, what few men would have done—you saved my life rather than see me drown."

"I am an outlaw, a fugitive from justice, but Buck Parker will ever be your friend."

"When my men have been whipped back, I shall ask you to keep your word, and then I will go my way."

"And keep my word I will," was the emphatic rejoinder.

CHAPTER LX.

BOYS IN BLUE ON THE TRAIL.

BOTH Boss and the Tonkaway seemed surprised to see the Texan and the prisoner walking back side by side into camp.

The man was given some dry clothing and his own hung before the fire, and his comrade eyed him queerly and thrice addressed him without response.

"Say, what's the matter, for you have sold out as I have?"

"No, I'm not as bad as you are."

"I did not sell out, I risked my life to escape, and but for that brave Texan I would have drowned."

"What you did not tell him he knows, and if you saved your neck by treachery, I saved mine by making terms with a man who had too big a heart in him to see me drown, for you heard all, as you know."

"We are prisoners together, but no tie is between us other than that we are outlaws."

"In future do not speak to me."

Breakfast was over, and the Texas outlaw Parker ate heartily, the Mexican seeming to have little appetite.

Just as Buck Parker had put on his clothes which Boss had dried for him, the Tonkaway reported the cavalry in sight, and soon after Major Gorman rode up at the head of the entire cavalry command from the fort.

They went into camp in a secluded canyon where they could not be seen from the other shore, and Texas Jack told the major of his capture, and the terms he had made with the two men.

"That Texas renegade is a handsome fellow, and has a good face in spite of his being an escaped jail-bird and outlaw leader; but I would rather see him go free by far than his treacherous and evil-faced comrade."

"There is honor among thieves, major, as I have seen demonstrated, for Parker has cut the acquaintance of his traitor comrade," replied Texas Jack.

"You will send them to the fort of course?"

"Yes, sir, Boss goes through to-night when we break camp, and will take them there."

"He will have to be careful."

"He will, sir, for he would kill them at the first bluff they made to escape."

"That is the kind of a guard they wish."

"But now to our arrangements?"

"Yes, sir, the Tonkaway will guide you to the canyon through which the Indians will retreat after their attack."

"Yes, I'll take two hundred men and the guns."

"Yes, sir."

"And there is a troop to go to the wagon-train."

"I will guide that one, sir."

"And about thirty men under Lieutenant Dick Turpin to go to a hiding-place and take the trail of the outlaws when they move upon the train."

"Yes, sir, and, after the Robber Rangers have been repulsed Lieutenant Turpin could push them to the river, while the troop that helps defend the train, I will guide on up to join you, as you may need every man you can get."

"A good idea, Texas Jack, for we wish to teach them red-skins a lesson they will long remember, and hit those Mexican raiders a blow that will check their depredations for a while at least."

It was just after nightfall, after enjoying one of Boss's good suppers, the major gave orders to move, and the cavalymen were soon in the saddle.

Texas Jack's camp was broken up, the Tonkaway going at the head of Major Gorman's command, Boss starting for the fort with his prisoners and the extra horses and pack-animal, and Texas Jack acting as guide to the troop of Captain Burton Bemis.

By daylight the major was in position, with his men in a secluded camp and his guns ready for action; but Texas Jack had further to go to meet the wagon-train, and it was noon, when they had halted, that the line of wagons was seen coming across the prairie.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE FIRST BLOW.

Boss had gone through slowly to the fort, arriving at sunrise with his horses, pack-animal and prisoners.

On the way he had laughed at the bribes offered by the Mexican prisoner to allow him to go free.

"How much money have you got?" he asked.

"One thousand pesos."

"That is too much money for one man to carry around with him, and you won't need it, as you are going to be hanged, so I want it."

"I'll give you all of it if you will let me go."

"All right, let me see the color of the gold," and Boss unbuckled the man's belt and put it on himself.

"I'll take care of this, and if you get off without hanging, you'll be in big luck."

"You stole this money, perhaps killed a man to get it, so I'll take it and hand it over to the colonel."

The Mexican called upon every saint he had ever heard of to heap curses upon the head of Boss, but the latter laughed, and when he arrived at the fort he went to the colonel with Texas Jack's note, his prisoners and the belt of gold.

"Well, Boss, you have as much right to it, I suppose, as he has, so keep it, save a hundred or so to go away with, for I shall have to do as Mr. Omohundro has pledged himself and let them go."

"I can do so with a clear conscience where Parker is concerned, after what you tell me of him, and Mr. Omohundro writes,

but that other fellow should surely hang," said the colonel.

"I didn't take this money for myself, colonel, but to go to the hospital fund here at the fort, for crippled soldiers, so please turn it over to the paymaster, sir."

"Boss, you are a noble fellow, and the fund shall go to the hospital in your name, for the needy Boys in Blue."

"Now hold yourself in readiness to go with the first news we can send to Major Gorman of the defeat of the red-skins, for Captain Omohundro says you go as a bird flies through the country, and can get faster and longer work out of horseflesh than any one he ever knew, so you were selected as courier for this ride."

"I'll get there, sir," was the proud reply of Boss, and he stripped his saddle and bridle of all extra weight, had a small haversack of provisions prepared, with a peck of oats for his horse on the run, a canteen of water, and decided to leave his rifle and carry but one revolver.

He changed his large, heavy boots for buckskin moccasins, and, as he said, lightened the weight on his horse, from the accustomed load, some fifty pounds.

He stabled his horse and rubbed him down twice a day, giving him the best of food for a long and hard ride, and said proudly:

"If any man and horse can beat the time we make, I wish to see them do it and I'll even up fairly."

It was the next afternoon when the scouts came in and reported the Indians as coming.

They had seen them with their glasses a long way off.

At once all was gotten ready for the fight, the horses and cattle were driven into corral after sunset, and the fort seemed to be resting all unconscious of danger.

The red-skins felt sure of a surprise, and dismounting two-thirds of their force had them creep near to the fort to make a rush, and then go over the stockade walls, while the rest on horseback, crowded up in their rear.

But, to their horror and consternation suddenly six cannon flashed forth red flame and iron shells, the latter bursting in the very midst of the red-skins, and hundreds of rifles sent a leaden hail following the booming of the guns.

It told the Indians that their intended surprise was a failure, and with scores dead and wounded they staggered back, followed by a galling fire from the fort.

The first blow had been struck, and the Comanches had been most severely hurt, and were in rapid retreat, pushed by three companies of infantry mounted to drive them into a stampede.

The moment that it was an assured repulse, that the Indians had gone without their dead and wounded, Colonel Elwood had handed Boss a letter and said simply:

"Go!"

The negro had been let out of a gate in the rear, accompanied by a band of scouts, and when sure that he was through the red-skin line of scouts, he shot off like an arrow on his wild ride.

When he dashed up to Major Gorman's command the next day, the soldiers could hardly believe that human nature and horseflesh had made the run in the time he did.

"But you did do it, Boss, and now we will be ready for the red-skins as they come along in retreat."

"One of your ranch cowboys arrived today, and he reports that they destroyed the ranches on the way, your master's with the others, and did much damage, sending back under drivers a large number of ponies and cattle."

"It is too bad, for Texas Jack has lost all."

"He'll catch on again all right, sir."

"He don't mind being robbed, he's used to it," was the philosophical remark of Boss.

CHAPTER LXII.

STRIKING THE TRAIN.

WHEN the Robber Rangers assembled at their rendezvous, all were there save their chief and two others.

It was known that they were to go by way of Deadman's Ford, and as they failed to ap-

pear, all believed that they had been drowned in crossing.

So the next officer in rank took command, as they dare not delay longer, and the march was begun from their secret retreat.

With no fear that their presence in Texas was known, not doubting that they would be otherwise than successful, they rode on, all unconscious that daring Dick Turpin and thirty troopers were dogging their trail in the darkness.

They knew the force of the wagon-train, and that there was a small escort, but, apprehending no danger, and, taken completely by surprise, they expected the trainmen would be panic-stricken and the work would be easy.

When at last they came in sight of the smoldering camp-fires, and made a dash for the camp, they were met by a volley of sixty carbines, and a rattling ring of deadly rifles that brought down horses and riders in a heap.

And more: the camp fires suddenly flared up brightly with brush all prepared to throw upon them, and the Robber Rangers found themselves overwhelmed, and such of them as survived that terrible volley fled for life back to the Rio Grande, only to suddenly come upon Lieutenant Turpin and his men.

Hardly had the smoke of battle cleared away when Texas Jack said:

"The victory is won, Captain Bemis, so we had better ride hard for Major Gorman's command, for he will need us."

"Lead the way, Jack, and set the pace," was the answer, and the troop was soon on the trot to the relief of Major Gorman.

As they came near the ambush late that afternoon, the sound of hot fighting greeted them, and Captain Bemis cried:

"We are noon too soon, Jack."

"I wanted to quarrel with your flying pace, but it is well you set it."

The Texan guided the panting horses and tired men around to the rear of the Indians, who, in large force, and furious at their defeat at the fort, and confident that they greatly outnumbered the soldiers, though they recoiled from the first shock with heavy loss, had made a brave stand and were flanking the position of the troopers.

But with wild cheers the command of Captain Bemis dashed upon their rear, and the result was a perfect stampede, many of the red-skins seeking safety on foot and leaving their ponies, while all of their camp outfit fell into the hands of their pale-face foes.

It was a short, sharp, deadly fight, and Boys in Blue as well as red skins fell; but the Comanches were set going toward their stronghold, and they were pressed hard, and by the skill of Texas Jack as guide were several times flanked and ambushed.

"Well, the fort won its fight; we, with your aid, Captain Bemis, won ours; the wagon-train was saved, and Dick Turpin will doubtless bring in a good account of the Mexican raiders, while you, Texas Jack, have covered yourself with glory," said Major Gorman, as the retreat from further pursuit was ordered.

CHAPTER LXIII.

CONCLUSION.

THE arrival of Lieutenant Dick Turpin at the fort, with half as many outlaw prisoners as he had men, and the explanation that those not with him were "accounted for," was the first news Colonel Elwood had of the saving of the wagon-train.

Their own victory had been complete, for the losses at the fort had been few, and the Indians had retreated leaving half a hundred dead and wounded behind them.

The report of Lieutenant Turpin showed that the train had been saved, and the outlaw band almost totally annihilated.

It then remained to hear from Major Gorman's command.

In a couple of days a courier arrived with the news that the Indians had run upon the ambush, but had halted and were making a stand.

The next day a second courier came reporting the arrival of Captain Bemis in the rear of the Indians and the stampeding that ensued.

Two days after Texas Jack arrived at the fort, sent by Major Gorman to make a verbal report of the battle.

He told the whole story in his modest way, and ended by saying:

"I sent the Tonkaway and Boss to my ranch, sir, for it was wiped out; but we will begin again all right, and some are worse off than I am."

"You are a noble fellow, Texas Jack, and to you we owe it that our victory was so complete here, that the train was saved and Major Gorman supported in time to prevent defeat."

"You shall be most favorably mentioned in my dispatches."

"Now about those two prisoners who are to be set free?"

"Turn them loose, please, Colonel Elwood, for I pledged myself to do so."

"If I send them together, Parker will surely kill that other fellow."

"It would be small loss, sir; but we'll give him a day's start, if you wish."

This was done, and the way the Mexican outlaw left the fort showed that he was not going to be overtaken by his now avowed foe.

Buck Parker thanked Texas Jack, saluted the colonel, and, mounting his horse, took the trail for the nearest ford that would lead him back into Mexico.

Texas Jack did not leave the fort until Major Gorman's command arrived.

Then the colonel told him he had ordered a dozen of the scouts to accompany him to pick up the straggling cattle the Indians had left behind, and ponies also, and drive them to his ranch.

Texas Jack would have refused this kindness, but the colonel was firm, and he added:

"And now, Jack, there is another thing?"

"Yes, sir."

"While the scouts are picking up stray ponies and cattle to take to your ranch, I wish you to guide me over into Mexico to make a visit to the Ranchero King—a duty call, to personally show my appreciation of his kindness to me and my daughter."

"Of course I should really get permission from the Secretary of War to go beyond the border, but I have the freedom of crossing to consult with Mexican officers to put down border warfare, if I deem best, and I shall thus cross and visit Major Sandos, and stop on my return to see the Ranchero King. I wish you alone to accompany me."

"I am at your service, as you know, colonel."

"And, one thing more, Texas Jack."

"You have an ex-Confederate friend in Mexico, who is crippled from a wound and poor?"

"Yes, sir, Mexique Soto."

"It was through him that you learned of the intended attack on the train and paymaster?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, the train, as you know, arrived in safety last evening and the officers and men all know how much was saved by thwarting the attack of the raiders, so that the Boys in Blue have all chipped in, as you call it, a few dollars each, and here is the purse which they wish me to hand to you to give the brave Boy in Gray to whom they owe so much—in fact all of us, from myself down."

"The purse foots up just three thousand dollars, and when I am at Buena Vista Hacienda, you can take it on to your friend Soto."

Texas Jack's voice trembled as he thanked the colonel and said:

"The Boy in Gray, colonel, will be made more than happy by this tribute from your brave Boys in Blue."

The start to Mexico was made the next afternoon, and upon arriving at the Buena Vista Hacienda it was found that its master had just returned home.

Whether reprimanded or not he did not say, but he came back wearing the rank of colonel, as the colonel of the regiment had been retired on account of his wounds, and the second in rank had just resigned.

While Colonel Elwood was at the hacienda Texas Jack rode on and made Soto's heart glad with the purse sent to him from the gallant United States soldiers; and upon his return they started for Hacienda del Monte, Colonel Sandos accompanying.

The Ranchero King was more than hospitable, and promised both Colonel Elwood and Miguel Sandos to return their visit, adding:

"And I'll look in on you at your ranch too, some day, Senor Omohundro."

Back to Blanco they went, Colonel Sandos accompanying its commander and Texas Jack, for he had been told that Estelle particularly desired to see him.

What she wished the reader can readily guess, for it was to give to him the Corsala miniature and ask him to wear it as he had done the other.

He gladly consented, and said feelingly:

"Yes, I can hold no ill will to one in his grave."

"Poor Juan Corsala! Would that his better nature had prompted all of his actions."

"This likeness is perfect, Estelle, and though I had the other painted by one of the best American artists, Corsala's is the better, by far."

Then the story of the engagement of Estelle to the handsome colonel became known and Delle De Silva said disconsolately:

"Now it remains only for me to catch the Ranchero King, Estelle, as you have landed the Mexican colonel."

Of course it was a sad blow to many of the young officers at the fort to have the thought of losing Estelle, but then, as Miss Delle De Silva remarked:

"It's a fact, and so what are you going to do about it, you gallant young scalp-takers in blue?"

"Grin and bear it," said Captain Bemis, when Lieutenant Dick Turpin remarked:

"I'll bear it, but I'm blanked if I'll grin."

Texas Jack went with Colonel Sandos as far as Deadman's Ford, on his way back to Mexico, and there the two parted with feelings of warmest friendship between them.

"You completely tamed Juanita Corsala, Senor Jack, and it was a wonderful victory."

"I know of no one else who could have done it."

"You saved her from herself, and from making wreck of her life, for she would have killed Miss Elwood beyond any doubt; and, after all, you were brave to let her go to the fort."

"I trusted her."

"And she would have died before she betrayed your trust, she said in her letter to me, which I found awaiting my return."

"She is a noble girl, and I am sorry to know that she intends to retire from the world into a convent, for she could make some man very happy as his wife."

"But good-by, Senor Jack, and remember I am always your friend."

They parted, Texas Jack watching the colonel until he crossed the river, and then, turning his horse, he started for his ranch, leading the pack-horse, which was loaded down with good things forced upon him by his many friends at the fort.

Back then to his ranch he went to begin life anew, with his true-as-steel pards, Boss and the Tonkaway.

THE END.

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